

異世界料理道

Cooking with
wild game.



VOLUME 9

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Illust. こちも



Cooking with Wild Game

– Isekai Ryouridou –

- Volume 9 -

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[Skythewood]

「ふーん、ギバの肉ねえ。」

そんなものを食べる人間がいるとは驚きだね！
ギバの肉なんて、臭くて固くてとても食べられた
ものじゃないって評判だったはずだけど？」

その声は女の子みたいにキーンが高く、
声質も細かった。やたらと可愛らしい
顔もしているので、スカートでも履かせれば
絶対に女の子と見間違えてしまうだろうなと思える。

刀の先端が、暴れ狂う襲撃者のかぶったフードを弾き、その面相を露出させる。
とたんに、鮮烈な赤色が目に飛びこんできた。その襲撃者は、ラールルウにも負けない真紅の髪を有していたのだ。

「抵抗、しないでください。あなた、野盗ですか？」

その瞬間、地面にうずくまっていたそいつは、
左肩を押さえたまま猛然と身を起した。

「ふざけるなッ！
俺を野盗呼ばわりするつもりかい？」

まだ幼い——予想よりも遙かに子供っぽい、
少年の声だった。しかし、その形相の凄まじさは
並大抵のものではなかった。

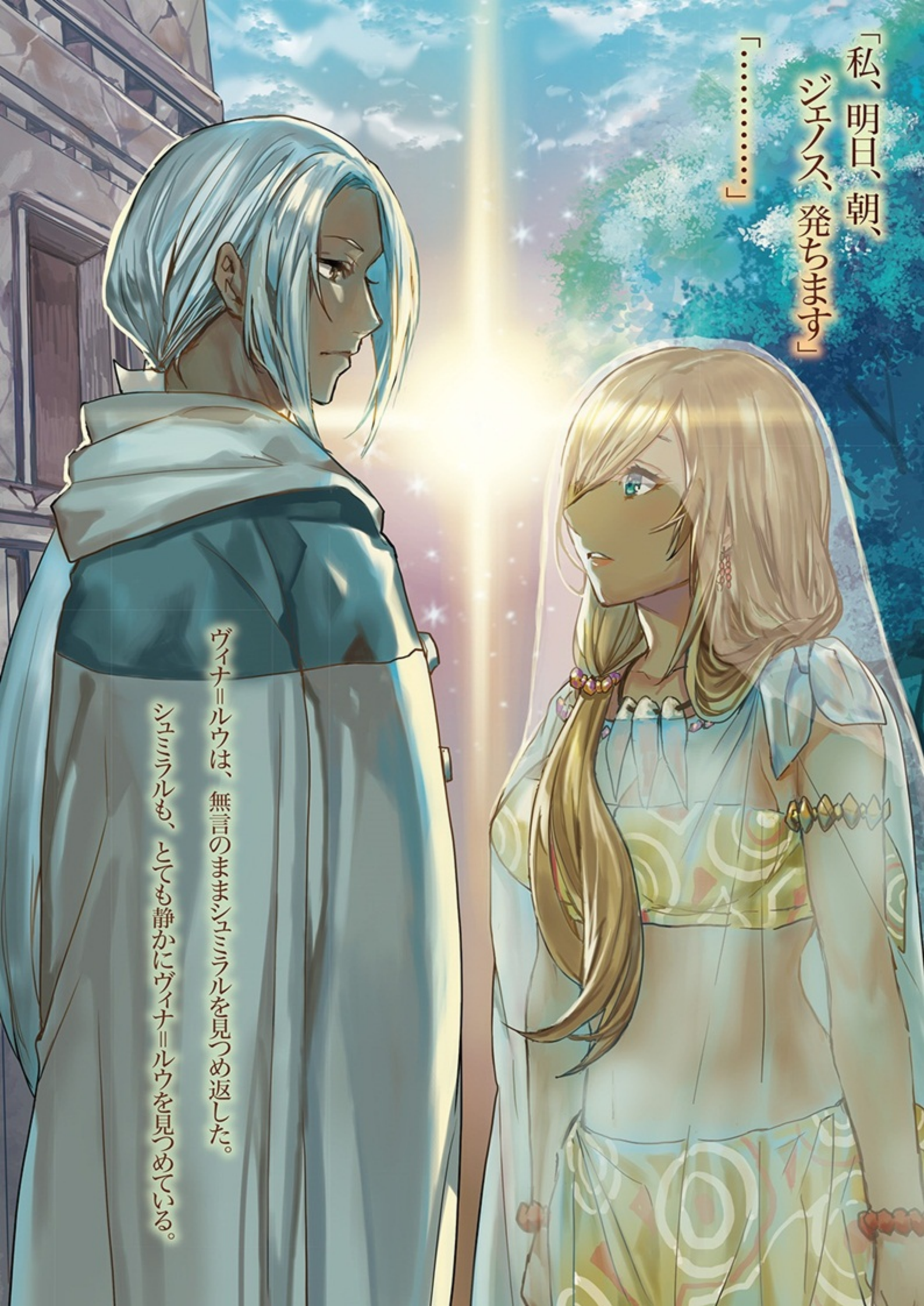


「私、明日、朝、
ジェノス、発ちます」

「.....」

ヴィナールウは、無言のままシュミラルを見つめ返した。

シュミラルも、とても静かにヴィナールウを見つめている。



Chapter 1

A New Encounter

Part 1

On the 28th of the Blue Month, the day after the Wu clan's harvest festival, he came to my stall. To me, this was the 31st day since I set up shop in town and the first day of my memorable 4th contract.

The first contract... The first ten days of my business was like groping in the dark. I only prepared ten [Kiba burgers] on my first day, which showed how cautious I was.

Sales in the first ten days far exceeded my expectations, and I expanded to four staff workers. On the last day, we sold 170 portions. 80% of our patrons were southerners or easterners, but I felt that this was incredibly good.

But the next ten days were marred by many incidents.

We attended the house head conference in the Tsun clan back then, leading to the commotion caused by Zattsu Tsun and Tay Tsun. The distrust towards the castle, clashes with the town folks, and other matters that weren't related to business also caused us a lot of trouble. Even weapons were drawn in the end.

The third ten-day contract that followed these turbulent times was more peaceful than I expected.

After obtaining Totos unexpectedly, I started catering food for the [Cryptic Venerable Inn], my second business partner after the [Big Tree of the South Inn]. There were many positive changes, and the unstable relationship with the westerners had finally reached a balance.

Sales recovered to the level before the commotion, and there weren't any westerners throwing rocks at us. Although they started looking at us with a suspicious gaze that was different from fear or prejudice, I think this was a good thing. Letting them know what kind of people the denizens of Forest's Edge were would be the first step towards

our mutual understanding.

And now, on the first day of our 4th ten-day contract, he appeared before us.

“Hmm, a stall selling kiba? Hey, is that food really made from kiba?”

There wasn't anything special about our meeting, and this was actually the norm for customers who first learned about existence of my stall. I didn't suspect anything and replied: “Yes, that's right.”

There was nothing strange about his dressing, which included a vest, pants, a hat, and a short cape. This was the common attire among southerners.

His brown hair was short and neat, and he had green eyes and fair-colored skin. His hair color was not uniform like that of a stray dog, but that was a common trait among southerners.

So the first thing that surprised me was his juvenility.

I didn't know exactly his age, but he was definitely younger than me, 15 or 16 at most.

It wasn't as far as the eastern kingdom, but the distance from here to the southern kingdom of Jaguar wasn't trivial at all. From what I knew, traveling to Nerva city that was at the north end of Jaguar—the hometown of architect Balan—would take half a month.

The further the distance, the more dangerous the journey. Perils such as bandits, wild beasts, and natural disasters meant one needed to risk their lives to travel in this world. Hence, in the Post Station Town, a melting pot where people of all races gathered, foreign women and elderlies were a rare sight, much less young people like him.

In other words, all the Semu were dressed in a way that made it hard to gauge their age. And while I had seen Jaguar people who were about my age, they were very few of them.

This youth was even younger than them.

Not just young, his figure was a little strange which brought me to the second thing that surprised me.

He is probably less than 1.6 m, which is fairly normal for southerners...

But being short and burly was the standard for southerners. Compared to the tall and skinny Semu people, they were stouts with short limbs but had big bones and tough muscles. That was the impression the Jaguar people gave me.

And Jaguar people at my age all had nice brown beards, which gave the impression of dwarves seen in movies and games.

But this youth neither had a beard nor was stout.

And a beard wouldn't suit him at all. He had large eyes like southerners, but the shape of his nose and cheeks were slender like a girl and looked rather cute. The young people in Forest's Edge looked androgynous too, but his facial features looked more delicate than them, so he was expected to become a handsome youth who would get all the ladies after growing up.

His thin body matched his face well. Especially his pale arms and tight waist could rival that of a girl his age.

This had nothing to do with his origins; a boy this cute is a rare sight no matter where he is from.

As I was thinking about nonsensical things, the youth walked briskly to my stall and stared at the [Myam-roasted meat] being heated on the griddle.

"Fufu, it's kiba meat. So there are actually people who eat such things! Isn't kiba meat hard, stinky, and unpalatable?"

Westerners often said that too.

His voice was high-pitched like a girl. He looked so cute that he would be mistaken for a girl if he wore a skirt.

But the important thing right now was doing business. My partner Lala Wu behaved herself and observed without a word, and I replied gently:

"That's not true. It must be the conclusion of people who ate kiba meat that wasn't properly processed. Kiba meat that had been cooked in the right way tastes as good as kimyusu and karon, you know?"

“How is that possible! Lavis, look, this is kiba cooking! Isn’t that amazing... I wonder what people who eat this are thinking!”

So he had friends with him. I followed the youth’s gaze.

Diagonally behind the youth was a quiet young man who was dressed similarly.

His body was well built like a southerner and wasn’t short. Being half a head taller than the youth, the young man was about 1.75 m tall.

With brown hair, green eyes, and fair skin, he looked to be in his twenties. His facial features were distinct, and his thick jaw had the strong feature of the Jaguar people.

However, this young man didn’t have a beard either. It seemed that not all Jaguar men had beards.

“Hey, Lavis, do you want to try this kiba cooking? If you do, I think you can boast about it when you go back home”

The youth said with a mischievous smile. The young man named Lavis looked at the smiling youth with a serious face:

“Dell-sama, is that an order? If so, I will carry it out.”

It was a deep and rough voice.

His expression was too stiff for a southerner, but there was still a subtle hint of loathing and disgust on his face.

...Ho, Dell-sama, huh.

It was rare hearing such an honorific in the Post Station Town.

Now that I thought about it, even though he was wearing commoner’s garb, it gave an impression of being very high-class. The design was simple, but the collar and sleeve openings were stitched and dyed perfectly. Along with his sheathed short sword meant for self-defense, all these were quietly flaunting his wealth.

Are they nobles? Probably not. They live inside the stone city, not the Post Station Town.

Leaving that aside, Dell seemed displeased by Lavis' reply and muttered "How boring..." with a frown. He might have hailed from a wealthy family but lacked etiquettes and manners.

"But kiba tastes really good. I have a lot of return southerner customers. Would you like to try?"

As I was saying that, I took out the plate for sampling that I had rarely used recently. But he said mockingly: "Stop joking around..."

"You think I will eat something like that? The food in the Post Station Town doesn't have any good points except being cheap anyways. And this is kiba we are talking about, I won't spend money on this!"

He revealed unwittingly that he was a traveler who wasn't lodging in the Post Station Town. They were just passing by here on their way to the city. Anyway, a peasant like me had nothing to do with them.

In that case, I could only pray that they would leave soon. But for some reason, they just stood there with no intention of leaving.

"Erm, you are a westerner, right? Why is a westerner doing business together with denizens of Forest's Edge? Don't westerners hate the denizens of Forest's Edge more than southerners?"

The youth put his slender arms on his hips and stared at my face a little arrogantly. His pretty jade-like eyes were sparkling.

"...What's so strange about that? The denizens of Forest's Edge are also devotees of Selva of the west now, right?"

"That's just lip service! They don't have the intelligence to worship god. Enough about that, answer my question."

This youth was too cocky.

But none of the denizens of Forest's Edge were bothered by this insult, and Lala Wu turned her face away as if this matter was of no concern to her. I could only suppress the displeasure in my chest.

“I’m not sure how to answer you. It’s true that I wasn’t born in Forest’s Edge, but denizens of Forest’s Edge accepted me as one of them, and I’m living there now. I just happen to be running this business and living in Forest’s Edge at the same time.”

“Fufu, how weird! And can you stop talking to me in such a stiff manner? You are older than me, right?”

I sighed in my heart. It was this conversation again.

“This has nothing to do with age. I can’t be rude to my patrons.”

“But I’m not your patron. Don’t worry, I will never buy kiba food!”

The youth then laughed in an exaggerated manner.

If I covered my ears, his smiling face was actually pretty cute, but my stress was still growing.

And then, a group walked towards us from the north as if they were here to soothe my heart. They were the Silver Vase led by Shumimaru.

“Welcome! Sorry for the wait, Shumimaru.”

“...What, wait I?”

The young easterner pulled back his hood, showing off his silver hair, and tilted his head.

I left the cooking of the [Myam-roasted meat] to Lala Wu and shifted a large sack by my feet to the side of the stall.

“This is the jerky you ordered. My deep apologies for handing it to you just mere days before the deadline.”

This was the 40 kg of jerky Shumimaru pre-ordered.

I wanted to deliver the goods earlier, but the quality of the Sudora house’s jerky was mediocre— or rather, the proportion of spice used by the Sudora house was too different from the other houses. The taste was too strong and unpleasant, so they had to work overtime and remake a new batch.

The taste of the jerky was different for each house. It was my fault for my realizing something so obvious. I consoled Rii Sudora who cried from the guilt, taught her the spice proportions that I needed, and she managed to finish it on time.

After inspecting the jerky inside the sack, Shumimaru squinted happily.

“Much thanks, for you, pay.”

The price was 60 white copper plates.

In accordance with the rule of running a business, I started counting copper plates in front of Shumimaru. Dell who was still hanging around made a curious grunt.

“What a hardworking Semu. You came from the north, are you doing business in the city too?”

Shumimaru turned his head calmly.

“Yes. Me, ‘Silver Vase’, Shumimaru Jiz Sadumutino.”

“No need to introduce yourself. I don’t plan to tell a Semu my name either.”

The youth stuck out his tongue in disgust.

How infuriating.

“Erm, this is an honored customer of my stall and an important friend. Could you please refrain from being rude?”

“What the hell, you are speaking up for a Semu? They are probably the only ones who are willing to eat kiba...”

Before I knew it, I was walking right up into his face.

But Shumimaru stopped me.

Shumimaru then looked back at the youth with a light of defiance in his green eyes.

“Please no fight. Southerners, easterners, fight no can, in western kingdom.”

“Hmmp! Then scram back to your eastern kingdom! Only the Jaguar people need to trade with the western kingdom! Just the sight of your faces pisses me off!”

When I first started doing business in the Post Station Town, the atmosphere between Arudas’ group and the Silver Vase wasn’t exactly peaceful either. And the reason they got along harmoniously was the unspoken rule of “not disrupting my business”. Hence, such quarrels breaking out between people from hostile nations weren’t that uncommon.

I understood that, but witnessing this personally was still an unpleasant experience. Even more so for Shumimaru who was being disparaged one-sidedly.

“...Pardon, back go we.”

After saying that, Shumimaru gave me a slight nod.

I hurriedly bowed towards him deeply.

“Don’t apologize, Shumimaru... That’s not my customer, and he was rude too.”

And of course, the latter half was said quietly.

The youth glared at us and stomped his feet.

“Worry no. Thank you, jerky for.”

Shumimaru handed the sack of jerky to his brethren, took the [Myam-roasted meat] from Lala Wu, and prepared to leave.

He then stopped unnaturally.

“Asuta... Vena Wu, not here?”

“Oh right! I almost forgot! Actually, Vena Wu hurt her ankle while performing chores at home, so she can’t come to town. I heard that she needs to rest for two or three days before she can walk again...”

It seems that when they were cleaning up after the banquet yesterday, one of the branch house woman dismantling the temporary stove dropped a large stone on Rimee Wu’s feet. When nimbly pulling Rimee Wu away, Vena Wu fell from moving too

intensely and sprained her ankle.

I was late in my introduction, the one substituting for Vena Wu at the [Kiba burger] stall was Leina Wu. They might be sisters, but they looked so different that others definitely wouldn't mix them up.

Shumimaru returned to the stall and leaned his head in over the griddle.

"...Vena Wu, bad, hurt?"

"No, she didn't injure her bones. She can still walk by holding onto the wall, so she would be back at work in three days at most..."

But today was already the 28th day of the Blue month.

Three days later would be the 31st day of the Blue month—the last day Shumimaru's band would do business in Genos. They would then set off to another city the next morning. If he missed this chance, Shumimaru wouldn't be able to see Vena Wu again.

Shumimaru closed his mouth with downcast eyes.

His facial expression didn't change at all.

But even so, he looked incredibly sad.

"...Understand. Thank you."

With that, Shumimaru left for real this time.

I sighed deeply. Lala Wu was just about to speak when that youth interjected:

"Really now, those Semu are so gloomy! Even if our countries aren't at war, I don't want anything to do with them! Why did you even bother befriending them?"

"...You are annoying. Aren't you being rude, saying all that to my customers while I'm running my business?"

I couldn't tolerate it anymore and retorted.

Well, he was really disrupting my business.

Milano Mast always warned me that, in order to upkeep the public order in the Post Station Town, I had to report to the guards if anything happened.

However, that youth just smiled gleefully.

“You finally revealed your true nature! You sound more normal without all those honorifics. At least, I prefer it this way.”

“I don’t care what you like. Unless you behave yourself, I will call the guards on you for disrupting my business.”

“Wait, Asuta, calm down.”

Lala Wu tugged my sleeve with an irritated face.

“There’s no end in bothering yourself with this sort of person. No good will come from quarreling.”

I knew that too. But during this period of time, the denizens of Forest’s Edge had to show that they weren’t lawless ruffians, and I couldn’t let anyone mess that up.

I was very bothered by the relevant people in the castle. Pyschkurewuss, who was acting on behalf of Marquis Genos, had plenty of mysteries about him. But with all the negative rumors centered around him, he could think of my stall as an eyesore since he was responsible for managing the denizens of Forest’s Edge. In that case, there was an even more pressing need for me to abide by the laws of the Post Station Town and settle things in a proper manner.

“Fufu, guards, huh. The guards in the Post Station Town are low-class soldiers, right? I don’t think they can lay a hand on me.”

“Oh, are you a noble so the guards can’t do anything about it? What is a great person like you doing at my humble stall?”

“I’m not a noble. I’m just the child of a mere merchant. Never mind, I haven’t fallen so low that I need to eat kiba.”

The youth laughed cheerfully.

His cute girlish laugh filled me with hate.

“Asuta, what’s the matter? Quarreling with someone?”

A new group appeared.

It was Pops Balan and the Jaguar architects.

“Ah, welcome. It’s nothing, thank you for your patronage.”

“Your face doesn’t look like it’s nothing... Never mind, just make it quick; I’m hungry.”

The group was all sweaty and probably worked from morning til now. Seven of them queued up in front of the [Myam-roasted meat] stall, and the other five stood before the [Kiba burger] stall.

And, of course, Dell commented on this.

“Hey, you! Why are people from Jaguar eating kiba!? What are you thinking!?”

“Huh? What’s with you? Given how pretty you are, the delinquents will harass you if you walk around the Post Station Town dressed like that.”

Balan raised an eyebrow and glanced back at him.

The youth turned his body sideways and pointed to the young man behind him with his thumb.

“I’m not afraid of any hoodlums! Lavis is a sword master. He had even caught three bandits before!”

I see. Aside from his dagger, that young man also had a sword.

But since I had met people like the denizens of Forest’s Edge, Kamyua Yost, and Malfreed, I didn’t feel intimidated at all.

Pops checked out the young man named Lavis and then grunted.

“I don’t really mind, but you seem to be some kind of big shot, huh. Are you from the capital?”

“Yes, I’m from Zealand.”

“Is that so. I’m from Nerva. Speaking of Zealand— that’s the city of steel situated beside an ore mine, correct?”

“Yes. My place sells steel items; we came to Genos to peddle wares.”

The air about them suddenly turned peaceful.

However, the youth didn’t want to end the conversation cordially.

“Erm, man from Nerva, why are you eating kiba food? You don’t seem to be living a hard life.”

“Why do I have to be poor to eat kiba? Kiba dishes cost the same as karon dishes. Or rather, kiba dinner is actually more expensive.”

“Oh? Then why don’t you eat karon?”

“Karon is nice, but the kiba tastes great too. I can only eat kiba in Genos, so I decided to keep eating it.”

Pops Balan answered crudely as he savored the fragrance of the kiba being heated up.

“I don’t believe kiba tastes good! Are you under some kind of evil spell?”

The youth frowned unhappily.

Arudas who had been quiet all the while laughed cheerfully.

“Only easterners can cast magic. And if I can taste something so blissful, I don’t care if it’s a spell. Just think of it as being tricked by me, and give it a try.”

The youth turned his face away: “I don’t want to try any kiba dish.”

But when he saw the men eating the freshly made [Myam-roasted meat] happily, the youth turned his gaze back again.

“...Erm, does it really taste that good?”

“Yeah, it’s really great.”

“...Hmm”

“If you want to eat, buy one yourself.”

“I don’t want to eat kiba!”

A strange rumbling sound rang out alongside his voice.

The youth grabbed his tummy with his face beet-red, and the architect group laughed heartily. This scene felt a little nostalgic.

“N-No! It’s... because of the aroma! The myam smells too good!”

“That’s right, myam complements kiba really well.”

Arudas replied with a smile, and the others in his group smiled too.

“This dish is fantastic, but I like the food served in the inn better.”

“That’s because of the Tau sauce! Ahh, I want to try meat grilled with Tau sauce too.”

“Wouldn’t it be awesome if you add myam on top of that? Isn’t that right, Asuta?”

Myam was similar to garlic, while Tau sauce was something akin to soy sauce. Both of them meshed really well with kiba. By the way, the kiba dish they were talking about was the [Braised kiba] I made with Tau sauce, which was sold in the [Big Tree of the South Inn] .

“That’s right. I tried grilling meat with Tau sauce and myam at home, and adding both of them works great with kiba.”

“That’s too sly! If you made it before, sell it at your stall!”

“I’m still hesitating about selling it. There’s nothing special about grilling it, and the price will increase if I use Tau sauce.”

“Yeah, Tau sauce ain’t cheap in the west. This won’t be a problem in Jaguar country... Just the thought that I can only eat three more days of Asuta’s food makes me feel like crying.”

“Thank you very much, I feel lonely to part with you too.”

The architect group planned to return home after the Blue month ends. Why did they have to leave on the same day as the Silver Vase? The departure of both groups at the same time made me sad.

“Farewell then! I’m looking forward to your dinner, so make it a good one.”

“Alright, thank you for your patronage.”

And with that, they returned to their work.

Only the two beardless Jaguar men were left behind.

I sighed as I looked at the youth standing right there with a sideways pout.

“...So, how long are you going to stand there? Since the dishes in the Post Station Town aren’t to your liking, why don’t you return to the city?”

“Annoying! Don’t order me around!”

His stomach growled again, probably because of his yell.

His pale cheeks reddened again as the youth glared at me.

“...Is the kiba really tasty?”

“I think it’s good. Comparable to karon thigh meat and kimyusu.”

“Karon thigh meat is cheap, correct?”

“That’s true, but only the thigh meat of karon is sold in the Post Station Town.”

“ ... ”

“Well, shouldn’t you...”

It was almost time for the lunchtime crowd to gather, so I wanted to tell him “Shouldn’t you go already?”

But before I could finish, my words were drowned out by a loud:

“I got it! Make a bet with me!”

“Bet?”

“If the kiba tastes good, you win. If not, it’s my win. The loser will give the winner one white copper plate!”

“But why! I can’t use the precious copper plates to gamble!”

“You really are annoying. Stop yapping and grill some meat!”

The youth let out a strange giggle.

This youth was probably a cute mischievous child that Ludo Wu and Rau Lei could get along with. But, given how his environment had sculpted him, I didn’t really want to treat him like a customer.

However, I was probably overthinking it to suspect this youth of being a spy for Pyschkurewuss. There were simpler methods to disrupt my business.

Still, I didn’t let down my guard and agreed with a nod.

“I will grill some meat for you. But I can’t use those copper plates freely, so let’s bet something else.”

“Fufu. What do you want to bet?”

“Well... If I win, can you stop being rude to my tribemates and customers? If you wish to speak ill of the denizens of Forest’s Edge and easterners, I hope you can do that in a place where I can’t hear.”

The youth narrowed his eyes deviously, then grunted again.

“Interesting. If I win, you will address me as Dell-sama. You can continue speaking with me in the tone you are using though.”

What a naive way of thinking.

Anyway, my request wasn't really logical either. It was almost time to make a new batch anyway, so I accepted with an "Okay" and picked up the pouch filled with meat.

"This is retarded, why are you wasting precious ingredients on this?"

Lala Wu said with surprise.

"If that person says it isn't good, with no regards for the facts, then Asuta has no chance of winning."

"I will just say the word Dell-sama sarcastically to someone that shameless... Anyway, there are ten or so leftover portions of [Myam-roasted meat] every day. It might be precious food, but this isn't entirely meaningless."

I was also curious what the wealthy class that dismissed the food in Post Station Town thought about my kiba cooking.

He would keep disrupting my business if I didn't let him eat it anyway, and he would lose interest in my stall if the taste didn't suit him. I thought that would be better than him being so noisy here.

Hence, I placed the meat soaked in fruit wine sauce and myam onto the griddle along with some aria to grill in a mid-strength fire. I then wrapped it with a grilled poitan together with shredded tino.

During this time, the youth watched me make the [Myam-roasted meat] with a face of satisfaction. The young man behind him remained expressionless and didn't say a word.

"Sorry for the wait, please enjoy."

"Fufu, the aroma is still passable I guess."

After saying things that weren't cute at all, the youth took the [Myam-roasted meat] that was fresh out of the grill. He then bit into the poitan wrapping fearlessly with his white and healthy teeth.

I braced myself for the insults that I haven't heard in a long time... Yet, the youth lowered his head as he chewed.

He then finished off the [Myam-roasted meat] wordlessly with a blank face.

“How is it? Is it to your liking?”

“...”

“Huh?”

“...Delicious.”

That was wonderful.

However, his voice was quivering.

The young man placed a hand on the youth’s shoulder and said: “Dell-sama?”

The youth pushed his hand away, walked quickly around the stall, and stopped right before me.

“W-What is it?”

He was younger and richer than me, but he was still armed with a dagger on his waist. Was he trying to attack me out of rage? I was about to back away when he grabbed my chest with his delicate and fair fingers.

“...It is really delicious.”

Dell slowly lifted his head.

He had a generous smile full of praise.

“Sorry, it’s my fault. It is so good that I’m at loss for words... Your name is... Asuta?”

“That’s right, I’m Asuta.”

“It’s really tasty. You are really capable, Asuta.”

The youth tugged my T-shirt harder as he spoke:

“Asuta, can you forgive me? I never imagined that kiba can taste so good. Asuta, you

must have thought of me as a fool for saying kiba meat is stinky and tough, correct?"

"No, I didn't think so at all... Erm, will you let me go?"

"Ah, sorry! I'm too excited!"

The youth unhandled me and took a step back.

His face turned red as he squirmed his body.

...Such a drastic change.

No, all that didn't matter at all. Southerners were forthright, so it was no surprise for him to be so emotional.

However, something felt strange.

As though he was embarrassed for what happened earlier, he was looking up at me with his cheeks rose-red. He was indescribably cute, which made my heart race.

No, wait, wait! I don't swing that way! Definitely not!

That was it. He said all these stinging words in the beginning, so this sudden change was very scary. He had delicate features, so when smiling bashfully without any ill will, even a guy like me would see him as cute... That was what I thought.

"Erm... Can you forgive me?"

"Huh? F-Forgive?"

"Wasn't I rude to Asuta's important friends? The denizens of Forest's Edge mean nothing to me, and the people of Semu are from a hostile nation... But my behavior definitely made Asuta angry, right?"

"I-I forgive you. So don't do it again."

"Really? I'm so glad."

Dell laughed happily.

His strangely colored brown hair shone under the noon sun. There was a clear light in his jade-like eyes, and his lips that were relatively small and soft for a southerner showed a blissful smile... His smiling face was as pure and cute as belonging to an angel.

“...Asuta, you are really incredible. I heard that a westerner is running a business with the denizens of Forest’s Edge, so I came here to tease you. But you surprised me instead... Hey, where are you from, Asuta? Are you an easterner mixed blood? Raven hair and black eyes are the features of easterners, right?”

“E-Erm, I’m not from this continent. I was born on an island nation called Japan...”

“Hmm! Asuta, you came from overseas!?”

Dell opened his eyes wide in surprise and leaned in close to me again.

Even with a serious expression, he was just as cute. The strange thing was, after stopping his sarcastic and defiant attitude, he looked younger and cuter.

“Speaking of which, your skin color resembles a westerner, but not your face. Your eyes look a little girlish too.”

“W-What are you talking about! You look more girlish than me.”

I replied on reflex, which made Dell open his eyes wide.

“Me? Girlish...? Asuta, you really are a cunning linguist.”

“Ahh, sorry for blurting that out carelessly. But we were both rude, so let’s call it even.”

I couldn’t calm myself down.

I tried finding excuses, but the panic in my face probably looked too stupid. Dell laughed out loud.

“Ahahaha! Asuta, you are really weird!”

I wanted to reply “Is that so?”, but stars suddenly appeared before my eyes.



I didn't know what happened and fell backward.

But Dell held onto me.

He grabbed my chest once again.

"Huh...?"

Dell's face was beet red.

But it wasn't from bashfulness this time, but rage.

Dell's angelic smile was replaced with raised eyebrows and a scowling nose, making an angry face.

"Hey! I'm a girl, you know!?"

Dell said as he landed another merciless punch on my left cheek.

And so, I got acquainted with the daughter of a wealthy merchant from the Jaguar, Dell.

Part 2

“Asuta, you really didn’t notice that she is a girl?”

Lala Wu said incredulously.

“She’s obviously a girl! Isn’t that so, Leina-nee?”

“Yes, that’s true.”

“What about you, Shela Wu? You noticed too, right?”

“Yes, she didn’t look like a guy at all.”

“Rii Sudora... Ah, you weren’t there just now.”

“Yes, but when I arrived, there was a southerner leaving the stall in a fit. If it’s that person... Sorry, Asuta, I can’t think of her as anything other than a young girl.”

There was no need for Rii Sudora to apologize. It would have sufficed for her to let me carry this shame alone.

After finishing all our work, we returned the stall to the 『Kimyusu’s Tail Inn』. We had other matters to attend to and needed to kill some time, so we waited in a small alley between two inns and the questioning started.

No, instead of a questioning, this was a denouncement. When that girl who was dressed like a boy left, it was almost noon. I needed to rush to the 『Cryptic Venerable Inn』, so they didn’t have time to denounce me back then.

I didn’t really mind, but Lala Wu and the others didn’t seem content with letting it go.

“I can’t even! You deserved to be slapped! I wasted my effort worrying about you!”

“Worry about me a little more. And I already got punished for it.”

Several hours had already passed, but my left cheek was still stinging. My lips might have split too, so I decided not to use Chitto for dinner tonight.

“She is a girl who is older than me too. I feel mad just thinking about this thing

happening to me. That's an insult towards women."

"Like I said, I was blinded by the assumption that there are no foreign women in the Post Station Town. Lala Wu, you have never seen women from Jaguar or Semu in the Post Station Town, right?"

"That has nothing to do with it. A man can't be so pretty."

"True. Shin Wu is good looking too, but that's what Lala Wu thinks, huh."

Lala Wu punched me in the liver to hide her embarrassment.

I was kicked and punched around all day. And it was all my fault, how depressing.

"Hmmp! I thought you were flaring your nose because you knew she was a girl! Your face was so close to hers, and she even complimented your cooking. Asuta, it's obvious how happy you were."

"Don't be ridiculous, I thought she was a boy, so my nose was fine."

"So you would if you knew she is a girl? Hmmp, should I tell Ai Fa about this..."

As we were talking about this, the subject herself showed up. I wanted to stuff Lala Wu's mouth... But a hoarse voice came from behind, asking: "What's that about me?"

I turned back with cold sweat and saw Ai Fa holding the reins of Gilulu and standing before the busy traffic.

"Sorry for the wait. I didn't catch any kiba today, so I set the traps further away."

"T-That's fine! Thank you for your hard work, are you alright?"

"It's nothing... So, what's that about your nose?"

"Well, there's a spot under nose called philtrum. If poked at that spot, you would turn stiff and couldn't move!"

<en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philtrum>

Ai Fa replied "That's interesting..." as she squinted suspiciously.

Before Lala Wu could say anything more, I bowed to everyone and said: "Thank you for today!"

"Since Ai Fa is here, I will go off and buy the wagon. Leina Wu, you have been a great help, thank you for coming today."

"Don't mention it, I'm just fulfilling the promise the Wu clan made with the Fa house... And I learned a lot today too."

I left the work in the inn to Leina Wu instead of Lala Wu or Rii Sudora. Lala Wu and the others might be more experienced with the work in the stall, but Leina Wu was better than them in culinary skills... And I was right about that; she showed her outstanding talent on the first day here.

"Before Vena-nee recovers, I will be helping out. I will be in your care tomorrow too."

Leina Wu said with an incredibly refreshing smile.

I felt that Leina Wu who had been greedily learning culinary techniques had gained quite a few levels.

I perked myself up; I couldn't afford to relax.

"Hmm...? Are you looking for me?"

Ai Fa smiled quizzingly, and I was surprised by someone rushing to Ai Fa's side.

"Shumimaru? What's the matter?"

"Asuta... Asuta and everyone, request, have I."

Feeling that something wasn't right, I jogged towards him.

The reason was Shumimaru's voice. The ever-calm and collected Shumimaru sounded a little rugged as he was out of breath.

On a closer look, Shumimaru's dark face was sweating quite a bit.

"Sorry... run here I, panting. Great see Asuta and everyone."

“What’s the matter? Something urgent?”

“Yes... I go, Forest’s Edge, can?”

I was shocked.

Shumimaru’s looked at me and the girls with his dark eyes.

“...Vena Wu, I worry. I go, see can?”

“Y-You want to pay a visit to the injured Vena Wu, right? Shumimaru, do you want to go to Forest’s Edge?”

“Yes.”

I was speechless and turned back towards the women.

Lala Wu whispered tensely to Leina Wu.

Leina Wu’s childish face fell into deep thought, and she then walked to my side.

“Easterner, I am the second daughter of the Wu clan main house, Leina Wu. The younger sister of Vena Wu.”

“Yes, I, bandleader of Silver Vase merchant group, Shumimaru Jiz Sadumutino.”

“You are Shumimaru. I understand... So, Shumimaru, why are you so worried about Vena Wu? Who is Vena Wu to you?”

“She, to me, no related. I, her, just worry.”

“Aren’t you Vena Wu’s friend?”

“No, stall she sell, I buy. That’s all. No friend.”

“I see...”

Leina Wu lowered her head.

“If you have no ill will, we won’t forbid you from going into Forest’s Edge. You are free

to go to the Wu clan. But our clan head will decide whether you will be invited in as a guest.”

“Yes, understand.”

“I will pass your message to the clan head and Vena Wu then. We will give you an answer tomorrow, is that alright? If the clan head permits, we can bring you to the Wu clan village.”

“Yes, very thanks. I, much grateful.”

Shumimaru made a gang sign with his fingers and then bowed towards Leina Wu.

Leina Wu suddenly showed a warm smile.

“I don’t know why a foreigner is so worried about Vena Wu, but I’m grateful for your kind thoughts as her family. Well then, see you tomorrow... Asuta, we will make a move first.”

“Alright, be careful on your way back.”

Compared to Shela Wu and Ema Min Wu, Leina Wu seemed more childish, but I felt that she could handle things better than me in times like this.

And so, the four girls walked down the street, leaving Ai Fa, Shumimaru, and me behind.

“Shumimaru, you sure are bold. You actually plan to visit Vena Wu.”

“Yes, I very troubled. And, if I no action, no see Vena Wu. Don’t want.”

I never thought Shumimaru was so troubled.

I understood that Shumimaru wanted to do something for Vena Wu, but, as he mentioned before, they were just a stall clerk and customer. The conversation they had were few and far between.

And Shumimaru wasn’t a westerner and had to leave Genos three days later. Their relationship had no chance of progressing.

And— maybe Shumimaru had no plans of developing their relationship anyway. He might just wanted to visit her out of concern.

While I was thinking about all that, Shumimaru looked at me with unwavering eyes.

“No trouble, Asuta. No worry.”

“No, it’s no trouble at all... It’s just that the head of the Wu clan is the tribal chief of Forest’s Edge, and he has a short temper. The denizens of Forest’s Edge and easterners have different ways of thinking, so please be careful.”

“Yes, much thanks.”

Ai Fa who had been quiet all this time spoke to Shumimaru instead of me:

“This is the first time in eight decades that an easterner had requested to visit Forest’s Edge... You are that person who asked me to protect Asuta during the commotion with the Tsun clan. Easterner, I remember your silver hair.”

“Yes. Me, Shumimaru Jiz Sadumutino. You, Fa house head, Ai Fa?”

“Yes, I’m the head of the Fa house, Ai Fa... If you don’t transgress the rules of Forest’s Edge, the denizens of Forest’s Edge won’t harm you. But you will be subjected to harsher punishment than Genos if you violate our rules. Please keep that in mind.”

“Yes, understand.”

Shumimaru visiting the Forest’s Edge settlement... I never dreamed that such a day would come.

I was happy and worried, and couldn’t stop my excitement.

“Shumimaru, if the Wu clan head permits, please allow us to go together with you. I understand Shumimaru the best, so this should make things much easier.”

“...Asuta, trouble you, won’t this?”

“Not at all. I’m worried about Vena Wu too, so it suits me just fine.”

I laughed softly, and Shumimaru squinted happily.

“We have to go now. I need to visit the assembly shop to pick up the wagon I pre-ordered.”

“Okay, thank you. Tomorrow, your stall, visit.”

“See you tomorrow, and thank you for your patronage. Ai Fa, let’s go.”

“Wait, I need to ask something.”

“Huh?”

I turned back and looked at Ai Fa. The conversation with Shumimaru didn’t seem to be over.

Someone suddenly grabbed my jaw.

Ai Fa leaned in close in the middle of the street.

“...What’s with this wound, Asuta?”

“W-Wound? Where?”

“Don’t try to fool me. Your lips are chapped, and your left cheek is red. Someone hit you there, correct?”

A fire was burning in Ai Fa’s eyes, and she squeezed my jaw even harder.

“Why is there a wound on your face? Did you fool around while I wasn’t with you, Asuta?”

“That hurts! You are breaking my jaw! I didn’t fool around! Due to a simple misunderstanding I got punched by someone!”

My jaw hurt even more as Ai Fa’s face inched closer.

For me today, this distance was too stimulating.

Last night... my heart was filled with all sorts of emotions, and I hugged Ai Fa’s body with all my strength. The warmth and vertigo from that moment wasn’t something I could forget in such a short time.

Ai Fa bit her lips, let go of my jaw, and kicked my leg.

She then averted her face which was slightly red. But I didn't have the time to watch her closely.

No... I did have the time, but I felt that I would blush too if I watched her closely. I didn't want to do something so embarrassing on this bustling street.

"We are going then! See you tomorrow, Shumimaru!"

"Okay."

Shumimaru nodded; his eyes were gentle for some reason.

Gentle and seemingly happy over something... Like giving his best wishes for something.

In the end, I still couldn't suppress my embarrassment and blushed.



The assembly shops run by woodwork craftsmen were situated to the south of the Post Station Town.

It was a single-story building with a high ceiling and filled with all sorts of wood. Instead of a shop, this was closer to being a workshop. I sighed in awe as I stood inside this workshop covered in sawdust:

"Woahh! This is incredible!"

The large wagon inside the workshop was the merchandise we bought at a high price.

"Yup, of all the single Totos wagon here, this is the toughest one. If you are not reckless with it, it should last you five to ten years."

The owner of the assembly shop was a middle-aged man that had the air of a stubborn craftsman about him.

He was around 40, about my height, but had a buff and solid body. His hair and eyes were brown, while his skin was yellowish brown. He had a towel tied around his waist, sandals on his feet and was otherwise naked.

Westerners around him dressed in the same way were sawing wood, assembling wooden structures, or fixing metallic parts onto them. This workshop not only made wagons, but also doors, desks, chairs, and other types of wooden furniture.

“However, you will need to inspect the wheels monthly. You can skip that part if you are fine with the wagon breaking down halfway.”

“Once a month? I understand, thank you.”

“...No need for thanks; I’m just telling you the right way of using it, so you can’t complain to me in the future.”

The owner of the assembly shop stroked his messy brown beard as he spoke.

He seemed to bear no good will towards denizens of Forest’s Edge, but his professional attitude towards doing business reminded me of Milano Mast, so I felt a little closer to him.

Anyway, the important thing was the wagon.

It was a wagon, but the shape was that of a covered carriage.

There were four wheels on its rectangular body with a large cloth cover on top. It was 4 m long, 2 m wide, and the top of the tent was 2.5 m.

A simple driver’s platform was erected in the front, with two poles used to secure to a Totos. The tent formed an arch, and after peeking inside I saw eight curved beams supporting the tent like a ribcage.

The body was mostly wood, but metal was used on the important parts. The V-shaped metal plate between the axle and the base was probably the chassis. I could feel the effort put in by the craftsmen and the functional beauty in this simple design.

It was a wagon I often saw in the Post Station Town, but this was the first time looking at it from up close. The shiny new wagon moved me. Ai Fa who was beside me opened her eyes wide and couldn’t suppress her curiosity and awe.

“It looks really big from up close. How many people can it seat?”

“Including the driver, it can seat six or seven. But you will need to control the pace of

the Totos if you have more than three pax, or the Totos would tire out.”

This way, we could transport the necessary equipment and five employees. The wagon alone was probably more than a hundred kilograms, showing how strong Totos were.

“...And this is the harness. Please remember how to put it on so you can make adjustments yourself. It would lose its elasticity after using it for some time, and you would need to remove it and put it on again.”

The uncle explained as he tied the harness onto the Totos’ round body.

He then looked at the Totos’ docile face in surprise.

“Fufu, no matter how obedient a Totos is, it would resist when harnessed for the first time... Did this Totos towed wagon before?”

“Erm, yes. I’m not very sure, but it should have done so in the past.”

Gilulu was one of the Totos that escaped from Kamyua Yost’s fake caravan, so it should have pulled a wagon back then. It didn’t have a harness when it was found, so the harness probably fell off while it was wandering in the woods... Or Kamyua Yost cut the harness loose before the Totos could get gored to death by the kiba.

The metallic part on the harness was secured to the two handles of the wagon. This was the wagon pulled by a Totos which was commonly seen in the Post Station Town.

Gilulu’s face remained dull, but it looked more majestic now. Ai Fa quietly showed a proud expression, which didn’t escape my eyes.

“Next would be the whip. Your legs can’t reach the Totos from the driver’s platform, so you need a whip in place of kicking.”

The uncle said and handed me a whip.

He called it a whip, but it wasn’t a rope-like object and looked closer to a stick used by horse jockeys.

It was made from a Krilee-like wood and covered with leather. It was 2 cm thick and 1 m long; the end of the stick was small and blunt.

“...What is this? Are you going to hit the Totos with this thing, Asuta?”

Ai Fa came close to me with a scary face.

I inspected the elasticity of the whip, turned back and asked her: “What?”

“Hmm, anyway, let me demonstrate. You heard my explanation earlier, right? This is used in place of kicking the Totos.”

“Is it painful for the Totos?”

Ai Fa raised her eyebrows and finally showed a dangerous aura.

“No, since this is used in place of kicking, it won’t be more painful than being kicked. Erm, isn’t that right?”

The uncle nodded as if he was saying something very obvious.

He was still showing a straight face, but I couldn’t help breaking into a cold sweat when I thought about what grievance he might have towards Ai Fa who was a denizen of Forest’s Edge.

“If you use too much strength and hurt the Totos, it might go on a rampage. Hit the spot where you will usually kick with the same force. This fella has a nice set of feathers and won’t feel any pain.”

The uncle explained as he slapped Gilulu’s butt.

He then narrowed his eyes in surprise.

“Hey, this Totos is not branded?”

“Branded...? Ah, yes, not yet.”

Kamyua Yost once said that the Totos could be branded as proof of ownership.

“Unless branded, you can’t prove that it’s your Totos if it gets stolen... Never mind, no one will dare lay their hands on the property of a denizen of Forest’s Edge. But it’s a simple matter of going to a Totos shop and spending 5 red copper plates. Just go and brand it.”

“...What’s branding?”

Even Ai Fa’s voice had started taking on a dangerous edge.

“B-Branding means using a burning hot iron to burn a mark. That will prevent Gilulu from being mixed up with any other Totos.”

It would be bad if Ai Fa lashed out at the uncle, so I answered hurriedly.

Ai Fa suddenly yelled: “No!”.

“I can recognize Gilulu without doing that. I won’t permit any branding.”

After being called by its name several times, Gilulu stretched its face towards Ai Fa.

Ai Fa then hugged its large head and glared at me with a mixture of anger and sadness.

“...I won’t allow it!”

I suppressed my sigh and turned to the uncle.

“Erm, this Totos had never been branded before; is that a violation of the laws in Genos?”

“That’s up to the owner. If the Totos runs away or gets stolen, they would just have to bear with the losses... However, it is a basic courtesy to other Totos users to put a prominent symbol on the reins and harness. The Totos are usually differentiated by these accessories instead of the branding.”

“Symbol, huh. I understand.”

I nodded and looked back, and found the mistress of my house searching her cape urgently.

She took out a familiar necklace of kiba horns and tusks.

After I started doing business, there was no longer a need to exchange the tusks and horns, what she got from hunting, for copper plates. It was a hassle wearing all these on her neck, so the excess ones were hidden in a pouch within her cape.

Ai Fa then took off three horns and tusks, strung them with a new string, and tied it on Gilulu's neck.

The hunters of Forest's Edge had the custom of gifting necklace to their female family members as a blessing to keep them healthy. I didn't know what Gilulu's gender was, but this was a fine gift since it was a member of the Fa house.

Ai Fa caressed Gilulu's neck and puffed out her chest proudly.

"Will this do...? I won't permit any branding."



“Got it. I’m fine with anything. I’m starting to feel that you are overprotective of your family, Ai Fa.”

Ai Fa said: “Annoying” and showed a face of relief similar to one after escaping danger. She then patted Gilulu’s neck.

The uncle muttered: “What a queer couple...”

Surprised by his words, I turned and saw the uncle smiling wryly as he scratched his brown hair.

“I thought you were a bunch of scary barbarians and didn’t expect you to fight so childishly. The denizens of Forest’s Edge are hard to understand... Hey, you have a stall in the Post Station Town, right? I spend the entire day in this shop, so I have only heard rumors.”

“Hmm? Rumors?”

“Yeah. Wasn’t there a bloody incident that involved the people in the castle recently? I remember that the villain from Forest’s Edge was killed by denizens of Forest’s Edge?”

I was speechless.

The uncle looked at me probingly.

“The people in the castle had always turned a blind eye to the crimes committed by the denizens of Forest’s Edge. They stir up trouble in town, damage stalls... and even kill people without getting punished. And then, that commotion happened. Weren’t you guys abandoned by the castle people?”

“I don’t think abandoned is the right word. The denizens of Forest’s Edge are also proper citizens of Genos, so obeying the laws of the western kingdom is only the norm.”

I didn’t expect him to ask this so suddenly, so my reply was a bit stiff.

“Fufu... You people obeying the kingdom’s law?”

“Of course! The denizens of Forest’s Edge that violate the law are a minority, and they had all been sentenced, or awaiting their sentencing!”

Zattsu Tsun and Tay Tsun were dead.

Zuro Tsun, Diga, and Doddo were imprisoned.

As for the others...

“Ahh... but for the crime of desecrating the grace of the Morga Forest, we plan to discuss with the people in the castle with regards to the punishment. They were merely following the orders of their former tribal chief, so I hope we can resolve this peacefully.”

“Grace of the forest? Oh, there’s such a law, huh. That’s a law that targets the denizens of Forest’s Edge specifically. The people in town won’t go near the forest where the kiba roam in the first place.”

The uncle said in an annoyed voice and waved his thick hands.

“All that doesn’t matter. The important thing is your relationship with the people in the castle. The townsfolk have to follow the orders of the castle people. Their words are law. And they seldom venture out of the rock walls, so they don’t affect us too much. The problem is the lawless people they turn a blind eye towards— the denizens of Forest’s Edge.”

When I realized it, Ai Fa was already standing by my side.

The uncle checked Ai Fa out with guarded eyes.

“Not a single denizen of Forest’s Edge had ever visited this assembly shop, so this is my first time speaking to one... So, what kind of people are the denizens of Forest’s Edge?”

“What kind of people... Even if you ask me, I can only say the denizens of Forest’s Edge are just the denizens of Forest’s Edge. They follow the rules of the woods and hunt kiba in the Morga Forest. That’s how the denizens of Forest’s Edge live.”

“Fufu, what a simple and hard life. Completely unlike that barbarian just now.”

Ai Fa pouted when she heard what he said.

The uncle laughed at the sight of her childish face.

“Never mind, it doesn’t matter for a guy like me who doesn’t really interact with people. The people whose stalls are in the main street and often see denizens of Forest’s Edge might think differently though... Anyway, I can only pray that my patron isn’t a big fat liar.”

“Yes, I hope we can prove our innocence through our words and actions in the future.”

“Then please pay the price for the merchandise in accordance to the kingdom’s law. After deducting the 50 white copper plates of deposit, you still need to pay the balance of 70 white copper plates. The whip and harness cost 7 white copper plates, so that would be 77 white copper plates in total, Forest’s Edge customer.”

The uncle smiled happily as he said that, showing off his white teeth.



“Ai Fa, what are your thoughts on what the assembly shop uncle said?”

I turned and asked her as I held on the reins on Gilulu which was pulling a wagon.

The road from the Post Station Town to the Forest’s Edge settlement was narrow, hilly, and covered on both sides with tall trees. The visibility was poor, so we didn’t push too hard and proceeded on foot.

This was the path Kamyua Yost’s fake caravan went through. Hence, the condition of the road wasn’t too terrible. But if a beginner like me made the Totos run by accident, the tent would definitely get torn by the branches. So Ai Fa and I used the machete we brought along to clear these obstacles as we walked slowly ahead.

Ai Fa who was wearing a cape and walking ahead turned back and asked quizzingly:

“What do you mean by my thoughts? I don’t think that westerner said anything strange.”

“Well, rather than being strange, he seemed rather friendly towards the denizens of Forest’s Edge. He also said that he rarely comes across any of them, so he doesn’t have any opinions about the denizens of Forest’s Edge.”

I pulled the reins to stop Gilulu from going too fast as I answered her.

“However, don’t all the businessmen look at the denizens of Forest’s Edge with critical eyes? After the resolution of that commotion with Tay Tsun, I felt that everyone’s attitude had softened a lot. But the root of the problem still remains.”

“What’s the root of the problem?”

“Huh? That’s...”

I was stumped when she asked me so directly.

What the townsfolk knew was that not all denizens of Forest’s Edge were lawless delinquents, the denizens lived a simple and hard life, and that the preferential treatment for the denizens had stopped.

But this information wasn’t confirmed, just deductions made from the conversation between Tay Tsun and the other denizens of Forest’s Edge. That’s why the townsfolk were looking at the denizens of Forest’s Edge with suspicious eyes.

Were they really barbarians with no regards for the law?

Were they really treated so unjustly?

Are they holding a grudge for their unjust treatment?

Would the people in the castle treat the denizens of Forest’s Edge fairly from now on?

They were probably trying to figure out all these.

“I think the people in the Post Station Town have been ostracizing us stubbornly. ‘The denizens of Forest’s Edge are fierce, and nothing good will come from getting involved with them. The people in the city are in cahoots with them anyway, so just ignore them’...That’s basically how they feel.”

“Yes. The Tsun clan committed all sorts of crimes, so this is to be expected.”

“Right. But a lot of things got dug up during that commotion, so people’s opinions will change. It’s like opening a gap in a tightly closed door and peeking out.”

“...That sounds similar to what Rimee Wu would do.”

I laughed when I imagined that image.

But I couldn't dismiss it with a laugh.

"However, things are still the same for the denizens of Forest's Edge, right...? Well, there aren't any denizens of Forest's Edge causing trouble in town anymore, so with time we can prove the innocence of the denizens of Forest's Edge... But, isn't there any other way?"

"I don't understand. Are you saying we should shout while walking around town and tell them we won't do nefarious things like the Tsun clan?"

"Well, that's not convincing at all... If the Post Station Town had something like a mayor, we could arrange for a meeting between the tribal chiefs and him."

I already learned from Milano Mast that the Post Station Town didn't have any mayor. The Post Station Town was governed by the Genos castle, and the person that had the authority of the Post Station Town mayor was a noble living inside the city.

"Asuta, aren't you worrying too much? It's the job of Donda Wu and the other tribal chiefs to worry about this. Your job is to cook delicious meal and build good relationship with the Post Station Town."

"Yes, but Donda Wu and the others don't really care about the Post Station Town in the first place... Isn't not caring a form of rejection? Leaving the evil deeds of the Tsun clan aside, I think their attitude is one of the reasons why we are estranged with the townsfolk..."

"It's a waste of time to get people interested in things they don't care about. And if Donda Wu and Graf Zaza came to the Post Station Town, the townsfolk would freak out just at the sight of them."

That might actually be true.

It was the women's job to buy things in the Post Station Town in the first place, so the men didn't visit the Post Station Town. Hence, the townsfolk of the Post Station Town lacked immunity towards the burly Forest's Edge hunters.

The hunters of Forest's Edge had the lifeforce of feral beasts. Leaving Donda Wu aside, even those with gentle appearances like Ai Fa and Ludo Wu had a different air about

them. They exerted an intimidating aura just by walking around in their capes made of kiba hide and sabers by their waist.

“But uncle Dora and Tara didn’t freak out before the female denizens and were fine when they saw Ludo Wu and Shin Wu too. That’s why I’m saying that they can understand each other better if they have a chance to interact. I’m not from Forest’s Edge, and I get along with the denizens of Forest’s Edge very well.”

“...I find your lack of danger awareness disturbing. The people in the Post Station Town aren’t as relaxed as you think.”

“But aren’t the denizens of Forest’s Edge very strict on observing the laws? So even violent and rough men like Donda Wu won’t be a danger to the townsfolk. We can find a way to improve our image with enough time, correct?”

“Aren’t we spending time on this right now?”

Ai Fa slowed her pace and walked beside me.

She looked at me with serious eyes.

“Asuta, have you forgotten what Kamyua Yost said? You are probably the only one who build up a relationship with the Post Station Town... You and the women from the Wu clan. You all go to the Post Station Town daily and prove that the denizens of Forest’s Edge aren’t a group of vicious villains. If not for you, the situation wouldn’t be so peaceful after that commotion with Tay Tsun. Or rather, the townsfolk would be left with only the fear of the denizens of Forest’s Edge after that commotion.”

“Yes, I get what you mean. But that assembly uncle spoke in a normal tone with you too, Ai Fa. He was guarded at the start, but he softened his stance because of Ai Fa’s charm.”

“ ... ”

“No, let me finish before you kick me! I’m not teasing you! I just want to say, what the townsfolk dislike isn’t the personality of the denizens of Forest’s Edge. Don’t you think the townsfolk would get along with people like Kaslan Lutim and Dali Sauti in no time? If it is Dan Lutim, anyone will be happy to drink with him.”

“...That might be so, but those men aren’t so free to visit the town for no reason.”

“Yes, but if we don’t do that, it will be hard for the townsfolk to get to know the denizens of Forest’s Edge: what kind of existence the Tsun clan was, what the denizens of Forest’s Edge thought about them, their thoughts on the crime, and other important things. That makes me anxious.”

I answered and tried to grasp the source of my anxiety.

“Which means that in Genos, the city is a completely different place from the Post Station Town. If the denizens of Forest’s Edge want to build a cordial relationship with Genos, we have to maintain normal relations with both places.”

Ai Fa was quiet for a moment and then sighed softly.

“Asuta, I think you are right, but aren’t you worrying about this too much? The tribal chiefs will be holding a conference with the people of the city soon. We can’t do anything else until they have done that.”

“Hmm? Ah, I shouldn’t worry about these things so much after all.”

“That’s not it... It feels like you are anxious about something.”

Ai Fa suddenly leaned her face in close.

This distance made my heart race a little.

“The denizens of Forest’s Edge have been discriminated by the townsfolk since eighty years ago. Zattsu Tsun’s gang merely added to the existing problem. Even though Zattsu Tsun’s gang is gone, I don’t think it will solve anything.”

“Yes, but Zattsu Tsun’s gang’s demise had a big impact. I think this is a chance to improve relations with the townsfolk in one shot.”

“That’s why I’m asking, why are you so anxious about that?”

Ai Fa suddenly pouted.

I wavered before this surprise attack.

“You are usually more laid back than others, but sometimes become anxious as well. I don’t like seeing you like this.”

“Y-You don’t like it?”

“I don’t like it a lot... It feels as though you are rushing to finish the troublesome chores before disappearing.”

Ai Fa said in a tantrum-like tone and tugged at the cloth I tied around my waist.

“The goal of the Fa house is to sell kiba in town and bring prosperity to Forest’s Edge, Asuta.”

“Yes, it’s as you say.”

“In order to do so, you have to increase the townsfolk demand for kiba. If you cannot do this, the prosperity can’t reach every corner of Forest’s Edge.”

“Yes, you are absolutely right.”

“That is why the denizens of Forest’s Edge and Genos need to build up an even better relationship than before. It’s only natural for you to put so much effort into this... But realizing this goal will take many long years.”

Ai Fa pouted and leaned her face even closer.

“So during this time, you need to work hard in the Post Station Town as a member of the Fa house. Don’t think you can do all this so easily, dummy.”

“But, isn’t it better to resolve these issues sooner?”

When she heard what I said, Ai Fa turned quiet unhappily.

It looked as if she was going to grab my shoulder... However, she put her hand down right away.

Ai Fa rolled her eyes at me this time.

“...You think I’m waiting for you to say that?”

“No, that’s, well...”

“Why are you making me worry so much?”

What I said seemed to have disrupted Ai Fa's train of thought.

I shook my head quickly and answered: "That's not what I mean."

Resolving the issues between the Forest's Edge and Genos before disappearing... I wasn't thinking about something so impractical. However, before seeing this to the end, I didn't want to disappear yet. This thinking was probably making me anxious without me realizing it.

"Sorry, I just want things to develop in a good direction. I'm just thinking about things with my limited intellect."

"..."

"I don't think the relationship between the Forest's Edge and Genos will improve so easily, so I think we should be more cautious... Erm, if things improve all of a sudden, that will be too good to be true and might be dangerous in a sense. I apologize for not thinking it through carefully."

"..."

"...Last night, didn't I tell you how I feel?"

I want to be by your side.

That was what I said while embracing Ai Fa tightly.

My heart was racing, and Ai Fa could notice even though there wasn't any physical contact... Just when I was thinking that, Ai Fa suddenly let go of my waistband and walked briskly ahead.

"...As long as you understand."

Ai Fa's suppressed voice reached my ears with the wind.

Before I could think up an answer, we reached the Forest's Edge settlement.

The scene here was the same as usual, with the dirt path being more even and wider as the only difference.

The path we were on was the lowest part of a T junction, and the route extended north and southwards at the end. The Wu clan village was just five minutes down the southern path, while the Fa house was an hour away to the north.

“Okay, let’s try riding in the wagon from here.”

Ai Fa grunted as usual in response to my cheerful voice.

I calmed myself as I climbed onto the driver’s platform.

Ai Fa also got onto the wagon and then leaned her arms onto the back of the driver’s platform with her upper body leaning over.

“Your posture worries me; will you really be alright?”

“I can’t check whether you are holding the reins properly without doing this.”

Ai Fa replied; her mood seemed to have recovered.

She had to be excited about riding in a wagon for the first time. After seeing her childish and gentle face, I decided not to discuss those complicated matters today.

“Basically, this is no different from riding on the back of a Totos. The control of the reins is the same, and this is just replacing the kicking motion with the whip. If I start and stop properly, there is no danger of me falling off the driver’s platform. This is easier for a beginner than riding directly on the back of a Totos... That’s what Leito said.”

“Hmm. Then you can more or less drive it, right?”

Ai Fa who controlled the Totos as though it was an extension of her own limbs in just five days asked me with a gentle expression.

By the way, I could finally make the Totos walk slowly without falling off.

I wanted to challenge myself and see if I could drive this wagon smoothly.

“Alright, let’s go. It would be a little wobbly, so don’t fall off, alright?”

I picked up the whip after saying that.

Ai Fa suddenly called out: "Asuta."

"...Be careful not to hurt Gilulu, okay?"

"Got it."

I tapped the base of Gilulu's leg.

Gilulu started walking.

With the whip in my right hand, I grabbed the reins.

First was the normal walking speed. The Totos moved twice as fast as a human, so it was about 10 km/h.

As expected, the shaking was bad. I should put something like a cushion on the driver's platform. Sitting there for long periods of time might grind my ass away.

"Hmm, this is comfortable."

At 10 km/h, there was no need to worry about falling off.

The height of the driver's platform was about the same as the Totos' back, so my field of vision was similar to riding on a Totos' back.

However, I heard Ai Fa's displeased voice coming from above me.

"This speed is really uncomfortable. Isn't it too slow, Asuta?"

"Yes, it's a little slow. Usually, we would have started doing chores at home about this time... I will speed up a little."

I maintained the strength on the reins with my left hand and hit the Totos' body with my whip.

The speed increased from normal walking speed to trotting.

The whipping force was alright, and Gilulu's speed increased by about 50%. It was pulling a wagon and two people, but the strength in its strides remained the same.

“It’s still shaking as much as before. Ai Fa, are you alright?”

“I’m alright.”

Ai Fa’s voice sounded closer.

“Hey, Asuta, aren’t you putting too much strength in your right arm? You are holding the reins lopsided.”

“Ah? Is that so?”

Ai Fa pointed that out quite often.

Even so, Gilulu still trotted in a straight line. Ai Fa said: “That’s because the road is straight, so Gilulu continued on ahead even though it was a little confused.”

She added that the confusion would accumulate the stress in Gilulu’s heart bit by bit, so I should hold the reins properly. Ai Fa spent the same amount of time with Gilulu as me, but her words sounded strangely convincing.

“Your right arm is stronger, correct? So you need to relax it a bit more, isn’t that common sense?”

“Ehh, but I’m putting equal strength on both sides though.”

“First of all, the height of your arms while doing it is wrong. Lower your right arm a little.”

Ai Fa’s voice got even closer, and her brown fingers grabbed my right wrist.

My right ear touched her soft hair, which made my heart race.

“About this much. Now, relax.”

I felt her voice beside my face.

Before touching each other, I could feel Ai Fa’s body warmth on my right shoulder and neck.

“I-I understand. Like this, correct? Hmm, this feels right.”

“...Why are you panicking?”

“No, that’s... How can I explain, stupid.”

“Who’s stupid?”

She pressed her head right onto my sideburn.

“This is necessary, alright? Do you still hate physical contact even during times like this?”

The anger in Ai Fa’s voice gradually intensified.

“Why do you look so unhappy about physical contact with your family? I know you don’t like it; that’s why I had been careful not to annoy you.”

Her understanding of the situation was very wrong.

Who would be unhappy about touching Ai Fa?

“But didn’t you hug me last night?”

Ai Fa seemed determined to make me die from embarrassment.

“I don’t want to make you feel uncomfortable either, but this is necessary to teach you how to hold the reins. If you are not willing to accommodate this, that’s... looking down on my goodwill for you, right?”

Ai Fa’s tone was a little strange.

She pulled her head back and took her hand away from my body. I could feel her voice and body’s warmth going further away from me.

I adjusted the reins as Gilulu made a small turn and sighed softly.

“Okay, let me explain the misunderstanding... I would waver when you touch me not because I dislike it, but because it’s embarrassing, Ai Fa.”

This explanation sounded so silly.

But we were born and raised in different worlds. Since our common sense and values differed, I could only convince her with logic.

“...I don’t understand why you have to be embarrassed.”

“You don’t understand? We might be family, but we are not related by blood, correct?”

“...So, you dislike physical contact? I don’t like non-family members touching me too.”

Was that why Ai Fa thought I was being distant with my reaction?

I racked my brain.

“Erm, you don’t hate Rimee Wu and Grandma Jiba touching you, right?”

“Of course, Rimee Wu and Grandma Jiba... are my precious friends.”

The latter half of her words were too soft.

I felt sorry for making her say something so embarrassing.

“What if you had male friends? If a man hugged you like Rimee Wu does, would you be unhappy?”

“Of course. But that’s because Rimee Wu is still a child, right? If a boy Rimee Wu’s age did that, I don’t think I would mind.”

“Yes, but when Rimee Wu grows up, you won’t hate it if she hugs you, right?”

“She won’t become such a childish adult.”

“Is that so? If it is Rimee Wu, I think it might be possible.”

Silence.

Ai Fa must have come to the same conclusion that such a future was plausible.

“Then let me ask you this. If you become friends with someone like Shin Wu’s little brother, what would you think when that little brother turns 17? You will be unhappy or embarrassed, right, Ai Fa?”

“That... might be so... but you are not a friend, but my family, Asuta.”

“Yes, but in the world I lived, once a family member reaches a certain age, we won’t be so touchy anymore.”

As I was speaking, I felt a sense of déjà vu.

A response came from my right.

“I heard that from you before. That was before we started the business in the Post Station Town... When we lodged in the house Lutim, you said the same thing, Asuta.”

“Ahh, how nostalgic. I think I said that before too.”

“Yes, we even talked about beddings back then.”

It had been a month, and she still remembered that so clearly.

As I was reminiscing about that time, she suddenly grabbed my neck.

My eyes were still looking to the front, so she probably locked my head.

“And I also told you back then: this isn’t your old place, but the Forest’s Edge settlement. Being a denizen of Forest’s Edge means following the rules of Forest’s Edge, Asuta.”

“T-That’s true! But is it normal for a family in Forest’s Edge to stick so closely together? I have never seen that before.”

“I don’t know about other houses, but we will decide on the customs of our house by ourselves.”

Her words didn’t seem to make sense, or was I just mistaken?

Leaving that aside, there was a wonderful warmth on my neck and right shoulder. My nasal cavity was still filled with the sweet scent coming from Ai Fa.

“W-Watch out! We are going to crash into that tree!”

“Gilulu isn’t that retarded.”

A pleasant sensation came from my cheek along with these words.

Just imagining it was bad for my heart. That smooth warmth was probably Ai Fa's face.

"...Asuta, could it be that you are not actually unhappy about this?"

"Huh? W-What? W-We are going to crash!"

"I don't understand why you are so embarrassed, but I'm glad that this doesn't make you unhappy."

She hugged my neck tightly and brought her face even closer.

At the same time, she grabbed my right hand.

"You are using too much strength again. Don't be nervous, newbie."

Ai Fa said with a smile.

Is there anyone who won't panic in such a situation? I cried out in my head.

In the meantime, Gilulu continued trotting with light and nimble strides along the path in Forest's Edge.

Chapter 2

A Guest in Forest's Edge

Part 1

The next day, when I appeared in the Wu clan village with my wagon, a small commotion occurred.

I already informed Lala Wu and the others, so I was mentally prepared for this incident. The children cheered at my arrival, which scared me a little. But thankfully, no one cast any accusatory gaze my way.

Before entering the plaza of the village, I pulled the reins to make Gilulu stop. I then got off the driver's platform and continued on foot.

"Welcome to the Wu clan, Asuta. So you learned to drive the wagon in just one day."

Shela Wu ran over from Shin Wu's house that was in front of the Wu clan main house.

"Yes. Ai Fa trained together with me this morning too, so I learned the fundamental skills. If I drive slowly down the path to town, it will be fine."

And the price of that was Ai Fa chopping wood and foraging herbs alone.

I felt apologetic towards her because Ai Fa wasn't too interested in driving the wagon. She only helped me with my training after I invited her earnestly.

After finishing the training, Ai Fa got off the wagon reluctantly when it was time to go to the Wu clan.

"From today onwards, I will pick up everyone with my wagon. First will be loading the cargo from Shela Wu's place... But since there is a wagon now, I won't need to borrow a pot anymore."

After I bought a griddle, we had to go through a bit of hassle; I needed to put the tarapa

sauce into pouches, meet up with Shela Wu at the Post Station Town, and then transfer the sauce into the pot she brought over. It would be difficult for Vena Wu and me to carry both the griddle and the pot, so we had to do it this way.

But now, I could bring as many things as I needed directly from the Fa house. The wagon had a pot full of tarapa sauce, the griddle for [Myam-roasted meat] , 60 meat patties, 60 grilled poitan, 90 slices of meat marinated in the sauce. Also included were the meat for the inns and 2 kg of jerky.

That was quite a large number of things.

Aside from the griddle, Vena Wu and I needed to carry that many things.

It served as fine physical training, but I felt really happy that I didn't need to bring all these things across that dangerous suspension bridge.

Anyway, I loaded the 90 grilled poitan made by Shela Wu onto the wagon and set off for the main house.

Over there, Rimee Wu and the Wu clan's Totos, Lulu, were waiting for me.

"Uwah, a wagon! Amazing, Asuta!"

I walked towards Rimee Wu who was mounted on Lulu. This girl who liked Totos as much as Ai Fa started training on riding a Totos so early in the morning.

"Amazing, amazing! But it looks so heavy, thank you for your hard work, Gilulu!"

And of course, Gilulu just tilted its head with a dumb expression.

Lulu also stared blankly at Gilulu.

"Ah, Asuta. Welcome to the Wu clan. That's all the firewood for today."

Mama Mia Lei who came out of the house after hearing the noise outside laughed heartily.

Leina Wu and Lala Wu carried a large amount of firewood out from the back of the house, and we were all set.

“Let’s go then; everyone, get on the wagon.”

Leina Wu, Lala Wu, and Shela Wu climbed on board noisily.

I glanced at them through the corner of my eyes and then asked Mama Mia Lei: “Erm, Vena Wu hasn’t recovered yet?”

“That’s right. Even if you ferry her over in a wagon, she can’t stand for the entire day. Like I told you right from the start, it would be three days before she can work in town again.”

“Is that so? Then, what about the matter with the easterner Shumimaru?”

“Well, we have decided to invite him over for now. After the clan head and I meet this guest, we will think about letting him see Vena Wu.”

“I see. I can vouch that he is a trustworthy man. I will be in your care then.”

I breathed a sigh of relief and led Gilulu to the exit of the plaza.

The wagon started rolling, and the girls on board started squealing.

“Let us be off. It will be a little shaky, so be careful not to fall off.”

I sat on the driver’s platform and hit the base of Gilulu’s leg with the whip.

Gilulu started walking briskly. Even with so much load, its stride remained nimble as ever.

It was still early, so I decided to let Gilulu walk at a normal pace instead of trotting.

It would take 40 to 50 minutes to walk from the Wu clan village to the Post Station Town, but a Totos walking speed could cover that distance in ten to twenty-five minutes... Even when traversing a meandering road, it would take 30 minutes at most. We could reach earlier than usual just by driving safely.

“Asuta, is it fine for our wage to be the same even though you are taking care of us so much? I feel a little bad about this.”

Shela Wu’s voice came from behind.

There wasn't anything dividing the driver's platform from the wagon, so we could still talk freely if we raised our voices a little.

"It's fine. The work will only start after we reach the Post Station Town, so please don't mind what happens before and after that too much."

"I see, but the traveling time got shortened greatly. We can gather more firewood if we reach home early."

I smiled gently; Shela Wu was a serious girl.

But I changed the topic.

"We already have enough firewood. Shela Wu, would you like to do some other work?"

"Other work? Like what?"

As we turned a corner on the Forest's Edge road, I raised up a proposal I had been thinking about for quite some time:

"Like making the meat patty for [Kiba burger] and tarapa sauce... or cutting the meat for [Myam-roasted meat] and its sauce. I'm thinking of handing one of these works to you, what do you think?"

Shela Wu seemed a little troubled and stayed quiet.

And I just waited patiently for her answer.

"But... If we interfere too much, there will be less way for Asuta to perform...?"

"True, but that is my objective. It might take some time to do so, but I have been thinking about completely handing one of the stalls over to the Wu clan."

Silence again.

I continued:

"I have had this idea for a long time now. I signed contracts with innkeepers, prepared the dishes, and ensured the taste and quality was up to standard. I then made a profit after deducting the cost of the ingredients and stall rental. If you can do all this without

me, then the earnings from that stall will belong to the Wu clan.”

“...”

“I had not discussed this with Donda Wu yet, and I don’t plan to rush this too. But as a precondition, I hope you all can learn how to prepare these dishes... What do you think?”

“B-But... why? Doing this will just reduce the copper plates earned by the Fa house and won’t benefit Asuta at all, correct...?”

Shela Wu’s voice was trembling.

A gust of wind brushed across my face, and I couldn’t help smiling.

“That’s not true. If I hand one stall over to the Wu clan, my job will be much easier. I can also expand my business in other ways... In order to do so, I need to work hard in studying and research.”

“Studying and research...?”

“That’s right. If things go well, I can cater food for more inns. Even if I can’t do that, I’m still planning to update the menu. The cooking time for [Braised kiba] is too long, and a dish that uses pickled Chitto costs too much.”

“Hmm...”

“I’m also thinking about new dishes for the stall. Right now, we have 90 portions of [Myam-roasted meat] and 60 portions of [Kiba burger] , a total of 150 dishes every day. But there are about ten leftover [Myam-roasted meat] every day, correct? Then it would be better to reduce the number of [Kiba burger] and [Myam-roasted meat] to 50 or 60 each and introduce a third dish.”

“Ah, you want to expand to 3 stalls?”

“Not really, this is just a thought. No matter what, I don’t want to increase the workload right now, given the situation. I will give it serious thought after handing one of the stalls over to the Wu clan.”

Considering the cost of the venue, stall rental and manpower, increasing the number

of stalls would just reduce the profits. However, I planned to introduce new dishes slowly while continuing to offer the popular items.

If each of the three dishes could sell more than 60 portions, it would fulfill the objective of letting more people eating kiba. Another thing to consider was whether we could compete with the other stalls if we sold 180 portions in three stalls, instead of 150 portions in two stalls.

Anyway, our goal in selling kiba dishes wasn't to earn money but to promote the deliciousness of kiba— selling not just dishes, but also kiba meat. This was a grandiose plan and also an exhibition of our merchandise.

“Like I said, I don't plan to push this plan ahead quickly. This business has been running for just a month. With how turbulent the times are, we have to exercise caution... However, I don't think the handing a stall over to the Wu clan will be that hard since I have seen the work everyone has done.”

If the Wu clan could run the business on their own, the goal of bringing prosperity to the Forest's Edge would persevere even if I was gone... It was one of the reasons I had this idea.

No one knew when they would die. This was common sense in this world, and I might be gone at any moment too. So taking measures to prepare for that wasn't a bad thing.

This might be one of the reason, but it wasn't the biggest one.

One month ago, on the fifth day of my business, this thought came to me naturally when Shela Wu came to help me out. If Shela Wu was this capable, could I hand a stall over to her? So I was just saying what I had been thinking about for the past month.

Mama Mia Lei also asked me in surprise about why I always choose the route where I stand to lose out. However, the objective of the Fa house was bringing prosperity to the Forest's Edge. Ai Fa's intention wasn't to gather all the wealth within the Fa house.

If this was a job that only I could do, I would give it my all. But if others could manage it, then letting them take over to free me up for other tasks would be the most effective way.

And those who were capable should be rewarded accordingly. Shela Wu had such a qualification.

“Erm... But, I...”

“I think there is no problem with your cooking skills. You have been in charge of the tarapa sauce all this time, Shela Wu, and you are good at making the meat patty for the burgers, right? The most important thing in doing business is to keep the taste the same. I plan to train you on this too.”

“...”

“By comparison, the [Myam-roasted meat] is easier to make, correct? Once you learn how to cut the meat, the rest is easy... But, honestly speaking, I would prefer you to learn the more complicated [Kiba burger] .”

“It’s fine! I’m good at making [Kiba burgers] !”

A voice answered firmly in a tone, different from Shela Wu.

I could already guess that was Leina Wu.

“Asuta, your myam dish has a stronger taste to suit the preferences of the townsfolk, correct? If so, it might be better to let the Wu clan handle the [Kiba burgers] . It will be difficult for us to make a dish we don’t like ourselves.”

“Oh, that makes sense.”

“I think it will be hard for Shela Wu to have the resolve to replace Asuta. It’s hard for me to do so either. But If I work together with Shela Wu... we can at least be half as good as Asuta.”

“You think too highly of me. With your powers combined, you can make a dish that exceeds my capabilities.”

“...Asuta, it’s you who thinks too highly of us.”

Leina Wu continued answering in a firm tone.

“Sorry, Shela Wu, I have been the only one talking all the while, but I really want to give it a try... and see just how far I can go. If it works, not only can I earn copper plates, I will have the honor of being a chef just like Asuta, right?”

“Honor, as a chef...”

Shela Wu spoke softly, but she was no longer quivering like before.

Only the sound of the wagon rolling along could be heard... When we reached a bend where we could see the road leading into the Post Station Town, Shela Wu finally spoke:

“...Will Asuta guide us on what we are lacking?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Then... I want to test my abilities.”

I answered: “Thank you very much.” with gratitude and then pulled Gilulu’s reins to slow it down.



Nothing of note happened after reaching the Post Station Town.

We were permitted to park the Totos at the empty space behind the stall. But the Totos would eat the surrounding vegetation when it was tied up, so we needed to pay an additional 2 red copper plates of venue rental.

The stall rental was 1 red copper plate per day, but the fee for parking the Totos was twice of that amount. The pricing did seem queer to me, but since the rental was cheap in the first place, I had no complaints. Leaving it in a proper Totos stable for half a day would cost 3 red copper plates, so the price here was more reasonable.

Anyway, business was good.

The southerners and easterners started queuing early in the morning, and when that wave left, the westerners started coming slowly. The southerners and easterners each made up 40% of my patrons, and the rest were westerners. This ratio was still the same.

Despite that commotion, the number of patrons remains the same. I’m really grateful to my customers...

However, things were still a little troublesome.

Especially the western customers.

During this month, the easterners and southerners had mostly changed. There weren't many of them staying in the Post Station Town long term like the Silver Vase and Pop's architects.

But there were those who visited Genos after hearing rave reviews about the 『Big Tree of the South Inn』 and the 『Cryptic Venerable Inn』, who did in turn patronize my stall. This trend was even more obvious after I started catering for the inns.

On the other hand, the westerners were always the same few people. Some of them came from another town to work here, but the permanent residents were the majority.

Which meant, the 30-odd westerners that visited the stall daily were all regulars.

I had no idea how many westerners lived in Genos' Post Station Town, but I recalled that Ai Fa said there were a few thousand. However, that was just outdated second-hand info.

Judging from how developed the streets were and the number of residential buildings, I would estimate there to be about a thousand to two thousand residents. It wasn't to the extent of ten thousand, but a few thousand people was an appropriate way of putting it.

And of course, not all the residents in the Post Station Town would buy their meal in the marketplace. The customers were mainly travelers and people working nearby. Some of them dined at the inns too.

There were tens of food stalls in this vast marketplace— more than 50, maybe even 60 or 70.

I heard the sales for a stall was 20 to 50 portions a day, which was about 35 on average.

Assuming there were 60 stalls, multiplied by 35, that would be 2,100 people. And my two stalls garnered around 140 patrons a day, which was quite a substantial number.

So the problem was still the ratio of customers.

From the pedestrians traveling on the streets, the majority was westerners, making up 60 to 70 percent of the crowd.

Of the 2,100 estimated customers, at least 1,260 were westerners.

Less than 30 visited my stalls, which was below 2.46 percent.

Only that many westerners visited my stall unreservedly.

In contrast, of the 840 foreigners, 110 patronized my stall. That was 13 percent.

One out of every ten easterners or southerners visited my stall.

Only 2 out of every hundred westerners patronized my shop.

No matter how well my business was doing, this was the reality my stall was facing.

On top of this huge gulf, that commotion happened ten days ago. Even so, there were still many people who didn't desert denizens of Forest's Edge and continued buying kiba dishes from us. This was great, but I still didn't know how to proceed.

...Well, I worry about this too much, that's why Ai Fa thinks I'm very anxious.

As my thoughts wandered astray, someone tugged the waist of my T-shirt.

"Asuta, are you okay? There's a customer."

Leina Wu who was tending to the [Kiba burger] stall with me looked up at my face worriedly.

I nodded at her and tapped my cheeks lightly.

"Sorry, I was thinking about something... Sorry, and welcome."

But my smile froze at this moment.

A beardless southerner was standing before me with a blank expression.

"Ah, hello... How may I help you?"

Leina Wu didn't seem to notice that this was Lavis who visited the stall yesterday.

"I'm here to purchase your food. Will you still sell them to me, despite what happened yesterday?"

His face looked unhappy, but his tone and attitude were sincere.

I looked around me, confirmed that mischevious girl wasn't around, and then answered: "Of course."

"I was in the wrong yesterday too. So, one portion for you?"

"Yes."

"But the dish here has a stranger taste then yesterday's dish, and the texture is more unique. Some southerners don't like this taste and texture, so would you like a sample before buying it?"

There were a lot less customers trying the samples now, and, if someone wanted a sample, I had to sacrifice some of my merchandise, which couldn't be helped. The two red copper plates used to draw in new customers was a necessary expense.

But the young man seemed irritated when he heard what I said.

"Is that so... Is the taste of this dish that heavy?"

"Yes, but there are southerners who like this dish. But on the whole, the southerners prefer the myam dish over there."

The young man tilted his thick neck and pondered aloud: "What should I do...?"

"Well, even if you ask me...": I gasped mid-way through my sentence.

From behind the stout body of the southerner young man, a head with uneven brown hair and beautiful green eyes poked out.



“Ah, so you are here too. Erm... Apologies for what I said yesterday, I’m very sorry.”

I took off the towel on my head and lowered my head about 30 degrees.

The southerner girl Dell glared at me with her left eye.

“What should we do? Want to try a sample?”

The young was about to turn back.

The girl suddenly yelled: “Idiot! Don’t move! He will see me!”

“Erm, you already showed yourself, so why are you still hiding...?”

I pointed out gently, and the small visible patch of pale skin around her eyes reddened.

“...Aren’t you angry?”

“What?”

“I hit you twice yesterday, Asuta, aren’t you angry?”

“Well, I did offend you in the first place. I don’t agree with violence, but I was in the wrong, so I’m not angry.”

I didn’t show a kind and gentle smile, but still answered her manneredly. And it was true that I wasn’t mad.

“...Are you really not angry?”

“Yes, I’m not.”

“...But I’m still angry.”

“Ah, erm, I’m very sorry. I’m reflecting on it.”

“...Do you still think I’m a boy?”

“I wouldn’t dare! I thought there are no southerner girls in Genos. I’m reflecting on my actions, can you forgive me?”

My coercion probably worked, and that girl finally walked out from behind that young man.

She was as petite as ever, with a slim figure and cute appearance. If I knew right from the start, I would definitely see her as a girl. I couldn't help wondering why the idea that she was a "boy that is as cute as a girl" appeared on my mind. Human psychology was hard to fathom.

If I was to say, she should have dressed more femininely if she didn't want others to mistake her for a boy. Her sleeveless shirt and pants were just like the young man's beside her, and the colors were plain too.

Be it the denizens of Forest's Edge or westerners, the women all had feminine attire and extravagant accessories and showed a lot of skin. This girl's body didn't look very thicc, but if she dressed the part, she would definitely be cute enough to turn the heads of everyone who saw her.

"...That person is really a beauty."

Dell looked at Leina Wu with serious eyes.

Leina Wu showed a troubled smile, tilted her head, and said: "What's the matter?"

"That person is pretty too, and the red-haired girl is cute as well. Are there a lot of beauties in Forest's Edge?"

"Well, it's hard to dispute that fact."

"...With so many beauties around you, someone like me will naturally be thought of as a boy."

"Not at all! You are very cute too and won't lose to them at all."

I answered on reflex.

In the end, Dell's fair face turned beet red, while Leina Wu narrowed her round eyes coldly, just like my house head.

"A-Are you stupid? You can't say that even if you don't want to upset me, or you will lose your credibility, you know? Asuta, you are really insensitive!"

“Yes, I hate myself sometimes too... Anyway, if you don’t mind what happened and are willing to try the sample, please do! I will cut the sample now...”

“There is no need for sampling... Will you really sell it to me?”

“Do I have any reason not to? I’m glad that you are willing to buy from me.”

With her face still red, Dell happily... really happily, smiled bashfully.

The moment I saw her smile, the last bit of grudge in my heart faded away. This girl might be a little mischievous in her words and actions, but she could face her emotions head on. If I had to describe her as examples using the people I knew around me, she was similar to Lala Wu.

And so... a smile on this sort of people was very charming. It reminded me of the first time Pops Balan smiled.

“Then sell it to me! How many copper plates?”

“Thank you for your patronage. Two red copper plates, please.”

“So cheap! Can you even break even like this?”

“Yes, this is on par with the other stalls.”

After Ai Fa started hunting again, I didn’t need to procure kiba meat from the other houses. The operation cost dropped drastically, but the other conditions remained the same as at the other stalls.

By the way, the meat today wasn’t bought from the Wu clan, but the Lan house. The price wasn’t 12 red copper plates for one kiba, but 120 copper plates. After Zwei spoke with Mama Mia Lei, I finally corrected the price of the meat.

The price was between 100 and 140 red copper plates, depending on the size of the kiba. Half a kiba would be half the price. Unlike the Wu clan which hunted several kiba a day, the smaller houses had to think carefully about how much they needed to eat.

“Then give me one! Lavis, are you really not eating?”

“Yes. I ate a light meal before leaving the mansion.”

The young man took out a pouch from his waist, fished out one white copper plate, and placed it on the counter with a thud.

“Thank you for your patronage, your change is 8 red copper plates.”

While I was making the [Kiba burger] , Leina Wu handled the change.

But when Leina Wu handed the money over, Lavis showed no reaction.

Leina Wu seemed to notice something and then nodded before placing the copper plates on the counter. That young man then picked up the 8 red copper plates wordlessly.

He wanted to avoid touching the hands of the denizens of Forest’s Edge, huh.

When the denizens of Forest’s Edge moved from the Jaguar jungle into the Genos, they switched their belief from the southern god to the western god. There were still some Jaguar people who used this as an excuse to ostracize the denizens of Forest’s Edge.

But the number of southerners who thought this way was in the minority and didn’t approach the stall in the first place. So this was a rare situation.

Hmm... They aren’t bad guys, but it’s hard to deal with them.

I thought this as I handed the prepared [Kiba burger] to Dell.

“Sorry for the wait. Be careful not to spill the tarapa sauce.”

“Yes, thank you!”

She was completely in a good mood and was all smiles.

Unlike yesterday, she bit into her meal without hesitation and squinted blissfully.

“It tastes really good! There’s no need to sample after all! It’s as good as the dish yesterday, Asuta!”

“Thank you, I’m happy to hear you say that.”

“But this meat is a little soft. Is this kiba?”

“Yes, I made it by mincing the meat and melding them together before grilling it.”

“Hmm, this is great. To think that there are proper dishes in the Post Station Town too.”

Proper dishes, huh.

I felt a bit curious after hearing that.

“Erm, what do you really usually eat in the city? Are there extravagant dishes beyond that of the Post Station Town?”

“Hmm? How should I put it, the food is completely different...! But Asuta’s cooking is great too. Why is a meal that costs 2 red copper plates so good?”

She took another bite of the [Kiba burger] gleefully.

“This diced vegetable is tino, right? And the one inside the pot is tarapa, correct? Cheap tarapa is sour, but this one is sweet and yummy.”

“Huh? There are tarapa which aren’t sour? I cooked it together with diced aria to neutralize the sourness and also seasoned it with fruit wine and myam.”

“Fruit wine, huh. But that’s just cheap stuff too, right?”

“Fruit wine is cheap. A bottle like this is just one red copper plate.”

“One red copper plate! It’s laughably cheap!!”

How incredibly arrogant.

It was probably her nature to not have second thoughts about her words. I felt complicated about her praising the food but criticizing the ingredients.

“However, you made delicious food with cheap ingredients, which shows how high Asuta’s cooking standard is. Why is someone like Asuta doing business in a place like the Post Station Town?”

“Because I’m a denizen of Forest’s Edge. How can a denizen of Forest’s Edge do business inside the city?”

Dell drooped her brows when she heard that.

Her mood changed really quickly.

“Sorry. I said ‘a place like the Post Station Town’. I don’t hate the Post Station Town, you know? The atmosphere in the city is too strict and doesn’t suit my personality, that’s why I come out every day... But, I just bring myself to like the cheap food of the Post Station Town...”

“Ah, I don’t really mind that.”

“You don’t like others saying your ingredient is cheap, right... Sorry.”

“No, like I said, I’m not mad! Eat up while it’s hot!”

“...Yes...”

Dell looked worriedly at me for a while, and then finally recovered her mood and started eating.

At this moment, a group of cloaked tall men walked over, which almost made me sigh. The timing was bad... or was their timing fixed? As I thought, they were the Silver Vase.

Dell who was about to walk away from the stall stood stiffly in place when she saw the silver hair under the man’s hood.

“Asuta, five, give.”

“Thank you for your patronage... Erm, does what we said yesterday still count?”

I asked Dell anxiously, but she just replied impatiently: “Annoying.”

The girl looked up at Shumimaru angrily.

“Hey! Let me make this clear first!”

Shumimaru looked down at Dell silently, like an avatar of calmness and expressionless.

This difference in temperament was probably the reason for their hostility. Dell raised her brow irately.

But what came from her mouth was: "Sorry."

"I don't like Semu people, but it's wrong of me to insult a Semu in the western kingdom. I'm sorry."

An apology with the tone of admonishing others.

But for this girl, she had to work really hard to make this compromise.

Shumimaru's face remained stoic, and he nodded gently.

"I always wait, Semu, Jaguar, end war. Hate Jaguar, I never."

"I'm from Zealand, which is in the west of Jaguar so I don't know anything about the war anyway... Ah, forget it! Don't let me say so much! I will blurt out something rude again!"

Dell bit into the [Kiba burger] again, as if she was trying to stuff her mouth. She then stared at me, as if she was asserting that I shouldn't have any complaints now.

And of course, I didn't have any complaints. I thought she was a good girl who could apologize earnestly.

"...Yesterday, in city, yellow mansion. You, I see."

Shumimaru said quietly as he waited for his [Kiba burger] .

"Didn't I tell you not to let me say too much...! Yes, I'm from Zealand so my family is obviously a steel smith."

"Zealand, steel, famous. From Zealand, buy blades, I, no business."

"Ah, you are the one who is forcing a sale to that old man? How unfortunate! In terms of knives and pot manufacturing, Jaguar is as good as Semu!"

She stuck out her chest proudly while saying that and then turned and looked my way a little worriedly.

"...That, doesn't count as speaking ill, correct?"

“Yes, I’m not that sensitive.”

Shumimaru was the one who asked her in the first place.

They wouldn’t initiate a conversation with Jaguar people lightly, so this had to be important to Shumimaru.

“We, every year, sell blades. But, he say, no need... Because you, sell.”

“Hmm? Ah. My father signed a special contract with that grandpa. I don’t know the contents and won’t tell my competitors anyway...! So, are you a steel smith too?”

“No, steel smith. We everything, sell. Blade, jug, glass, cloth.”

“Oh? Then you will need to change your business direction! Steel is a specialty of Jaguar, and Zealand is a city that became prosperous because of steel! We won’t lose to a jack-of-all-trades merchant!”

Dell looked at my face after finishing each sentence.

But right now, I felt more relief than anger. And it was necessary for merchants to promote their products.

“I will work hard, make, good blade... But, say something, can I?”

“What? You sure can talk for a Semu.”

“Chat, I like. More western language, I want learn... Yellow mansion old man, promise break. Blade, waste prepare. Careful, you should.”

“Hmm? What are you talking about!? If your business fell through because there is no contract, then you can’t complain. How did you manage to run a merchant group?”

“I sign, contract. Contract, violate. He say, if want sue him, go city, make entry pass. Cannot, so give up, contract.”

When she heard what Shumimaru said, Dell’s face turned from cute to scary. Like a dog who got disturbed mid-meal.

“What is this? Is that old man such a problematic person? Never mind, instead of a

noble, he looks closer to being a broke merchant. So, why are you telling this to a business competitor?"

"Why... No reason."

Shumimaru then squinted.

It was a happy squint.

"Buy apologize, you did. I think, rarely seen Jaguar girl, you are. So, talk to you, I want."

Dell averted her head and grumbled: "Hmmp! What's so strange about that!"

She then glanced at Shumimaru:

"...Never mind, I will tell my father to be careful. I don't know if this is true, so I won't thank you for this."

"Thanks, no need. We, make blades, work hard together."

After finishing this line of questioning, Shumimaru ate his [Kiba burger] too.

I wanted to tell Shumimaru as soon as possible that he had been permitted to visit the Wu clan, but I should say that after that combative girl had left.

And so, I decided to make idle chat.

"Business in the city is hard too... By the way, are you doing business with the nobles, Shumimaru?"

"Yes. By chance, meet. Old man, many blades, buy. Vegetable knife, meat knife, buy many."

"Ah, so the knives are for culinary use."

The knife beside me was a high-quality vegetable knife that I bought from Shumimaru with 18 white copper plates.

"That old man is really engrossed with gourmet food! He had dealings with several restaurants, and even has a live-in chef! He also prepared rooms for us! His

personality isn't great, but he is a really gracious host!":

Dell interjected strongly.

"You lived in that noble's mansion? What a surprise."

"It's not too bad! If things go well, the soldiers in the city will buy their weapons from us... Ah, that's confidential!"

I looked at the girl covering her mouth with a wry smile.

"Don't worry, I won't spread that news. We don't want to get on the noble's bad side."

"Please do so, okay? That old man's personality isn't that great! To a noble, money is more important than the lives of peasants."

After Dell said that, her eyes started sparkling.

"Oh, right! Why don't I introduce Asuta to that old man? If you work for a noble as a chef, you will be able to rest easy for the rest of your life!"

"No need, no need! I'm more suited for the Post Station Town! I definitely can't cook anything that a noble will like!"

"Is that so... I feel that Asuta won't lose to the chef in that mansion."

Dell puffed her cheeks unhappily.

"It's better to not be involved with that scummy old man. It will be bad if he drags you in... I really feel like letting them try Asuta's cooking. Those nobles will definitely be shocked by how delicious kiba is!"

The nobles in the city were a faraway existence to me. Just working in the Post Station Town was busy enough for me.

By the way... a scummy old man, huh.

I hated those types too, but I still wanted to see for myself.

"By the way, what's his name? Erm... It's fine if it's not convenient for you to tell me."

“Hmm? His name? What’s he called... Something like Zurun or Taran.”

I felt relief.

On the other hand, I also didn’t want to get involved with the nobles. And I didn’t want to suspect this girl who had finally warmed up to me as a spy.

Anyway, I didn’t even know how many aristocrats there were in the Genos city, and it couldn’t be so coincidental... At this moment, Shumimaru said: “No.”

“Yellow mansion, old man, is Count Turan. Turan territory, north of, Genos. Many field, for fuwano, fruits.”

“Yes, that’s right, it’s Count Turan! Erm, that’s the title, not the name, correct?”

“Yes, Turan Count house, Head, Pyschkurewuss. Genos, three noble house, one of.”

Shumimaru said quietly.

I looked up, and it was almost noon... I then sighed with all my strength.

Part 2

“I, no know well, Lord Pyschkurewuss. Business with him, I do, through his delegate.”

On the way back to Forest’s Edge after closing up shop, Shumimaru who had been recognized as a guest got on the wagon with the girls and explained:

“Twice, Lord Pyschkurewuss, I see. No much speak. But... I think, let down guard, cannot. Else, promise, he no keep.”

“Is that so. He broke the contract and even asked you to request for an entry pass so you can sue him in the city, how vicious.”

“Yes. So, Lord Pyschkurewuss, I no do business, no regret. Break bad relations, I want.”

Breaking off such ties was for the best.

But, as the denizens of Forest’s Edge, we couldn’t break off such ties even if we didn’t like their way of doing things. We would finally be having a meeting with the people in the city tomorrow.

Kamyua Yost and Malfreed seemed to be doing something to dig up the skeletons in Pyschkurewuss’ closet, but they had not found the crucial evidence yet. Our goal was different from them right from the start. It would be possible for us to work together if Pyschkurewuss was confirmed as the common enemy of the denizens of Forest’s Edge and them... But right now, Pyschkurewuss seemed to be just a grey character that took advantage of the Tsun clan.

Leaving all these matters aside, Pyschkurewuss was a representative of the governing tier in Genos and even demanded the Forest’s Edge settlement to hand over all 39 Tsun clan members.

Aside from Zuro Tsun who had been judged guilty by the Forest’s Edge, Pyschkurewuss also demanded Diga, Doddo, Mida and Yamiel, Zwei and Aura— and even Tulu Deng, her father and all the branch family members to be handed over to Genos city.

Anyway, this problem will have to wait until the end of tomorrow’s conference... And someone related to this Pyschkurewuss just happened to be my customer.

According to Dell who claimed to be the daughter of a steel merchant, she was traveling with her father, who was the leader of a merchant group, and learning the ropes of running a business.

Her father was a rather wealthy merchant and had been doing business in Genos city for many years now. He even obtained a contract with a grand noble Pyschkurewuss during his last visit.

This time, he brought the merchandise ordered by Pyschkurewuss— a deal to procure kitchen knives, the same deal that Pyschkurewuss didn't follow through Shumimaru—and reached Genos two nights ago. Dell, who was allowed to move freely on the second day, came to the Post Station Town with her escort Lavis and discovered my stall.

There wasn't anything strange about all this. My stall was situated at the northern end of the Post Station Town and was easy for people coming in from the north side of the city to spot.

Even though this was just a coincidental meeting, I thought keeping an adequate distance from her would be the appropriate strategy. However, the problem was with Dell and what she thought about all this.

I carefully steered Gilulu as I sighed.

"Asuta, down, you seem to be. Worry, I am. Lord Pyschkurewuss, what about him?"

"Yes, it's nothing, just that... for the denizens of Forest's Edge, Pyschkurewuss is a familiar figure."

"Familiar? Nobles in city, the denizens of Forest's Edge, dealings?"

At this point, I decided to answer: "Yes." If I was to say too much, Shumimaru could get embroiled in unnecessary conflict.

After a moment of silence, Shumimaru muttered: "I see" and then became silent.

And then, I finally saw the Wu clan village.

I parked the wagon at the entrance of the plaza and then alighted together with everyone else. We parted ways with Rii Sudora who needed to go shopping, so there was just Shumimaru, Leina Wu, Lala Wu and Shela Wu with me.

Most of the women and children in the village were working, be it sunning herbs, tanning hides, or chopping wood. They already knew that Shumimaru would be visiting, and there wasn't any commotion.

However, the gaze on Shumimaru wasn't warm at all. It wasn't hostile or cold, but everyone's gaze bore the same suspicion— *why is an easterner visiting the village*. It was the same for the children who cheered when they saw Totos and wagons.

Curiosity, doubt, and worry filled their gazes as they looked at the foreigner, unsure if he was friend or foe. Before Ai Fa told me to dress appropriately for Forest's Edge, the other denizens also cast similar gazes towards me.

Just like the denizens of Forest's Edge were judged by others in the Post Station Town, the townsfolk got the same treatment in Forest's Edge. However, things were only so peaceful because this visit was planned ahead of time. If Kamyua Yost and others happened to run into them during their course of work, these men might have even drawn their blades.

There was still a long road ahead before the denizens of Forest's Edge and the townsfolk could understand each other... This was a sobering fact.

"Hmm? Darum-nii?"

Lala Wu said loudly.

The person she was talking about walked out from the Wu clan main house right in front of us, approaching us slowly.

He was wearing hunter's clothes and a set of large and small blades, showing readiness to hunt.

After the harvest festival, the Wu clan village entered the hunting offseason. For the next half a month, the hunters could stop their work and rest their exhausted bodies. However, Darum Wu was still in hunter's garb, and it was the reason for Lala Wu's befuddlement.

"What's going on? Where are you going, armed like that?"

Darum Wu stopped 3 meters away from us.

He looked at his family and guests with subdued eyes.

“...The Zaza village. For the next few days, Wu and Sauti clans will be loaning them people in order to watch Zuro Tsun and his gang.”

“Huh!? So Darum-nii is going? But didn’t you just come back from the Tsun village recently!? Can’t we send someone from branch houses, for example, the Lutim or Lei house?”

“House Lutim and house Lei will send one man each. I am representing the Wu clan.”

“Why must it be Darum-nii!? Why is Papa Donda dumping all the troublesome matters on you?”

Lala Wu looked very displeased, Leina Wu seemed worried, while Shela Wu appeared more depressed than anyone else.

Darum Wu tilted his head puzzledly and then walked closer with the silent footstep of a hunter. After looking at his family members for a while, he said:

“This has nothing to do with father, I wanted to go on my own. Stop being so noisy.”

“You yourself? But why!? You just came back after half a month, and it hasn’t even been three days! You weren’t home... for my birthday too.”

Lala Wu was more violent towards this second son of the Wu clan than I imagined.

Darum Wu frowned annoyedly and then patted his sister’s head.

“The work this time won’t be for too long, assuming the conference tomorrow goes smoothly. Anyway... I have business with the Zaza house.”

“The Zaza house? What business? You don’t have anyone you know in the northern tribe, correct?”

“What’s with all your questions, so annoying. I’m just going to visit their stupid sons.”

After saying that, Darum Wu stole a glance at Shela Wu but looked away quickly. He then said “I’m going then.” and went off.

That pissed me off, so I yelled: “Wait!”

“You said you have business with Doddo and Diga, what happened to them? What’s going on here?”

I was worried about something different from Lala Wu.

Because of their escape attempt from the Dom house, Doddo and Diga were imprisoned again. There was no meaning for Darum Wu to visit them. I felt uneasy since I didn’t know what Darum Wu was thinking.

“...This doesn’t concern you, Asuta of the Fa house.”

But Darum Wu didn’t even look at me.

Feeling worried, I debated on whether to hand the reins to someone and give chase, but a hand grabbed my arm.

Shela Wu was the one who stopped me.

She whispered into my ear:

“Let him go, it must be very important for Darum Wu.”

“Do you know the reason, Shela Wu?”

I asked softly while staying vigilant of Lala Wu and Leina Wu’s gazes.

But Shela Wu just shook her head sadly.

“I don’t know what’s troubling Darum Wu either. But on the night of the banquet, Darum Wu said that he was weak... Not just physically, but also mentally. This weakness might be similar to the men of the Tsun clan who fell into depravity because of the reputation and prowess of their clan— Darum Wu said that.”

Darum Wu wanted to see Diga and Doddo in order to judge how weak he was.

It was hard for me to understand his feelings.

Anyway, I couldn’t stop Darum Wu who was heading towards the Zaza house with a

mission. We could only go on with stifled feelings in our hearts.

I parked the wagon before the main house and tied Gilulu who was freed from its load to a tree nearby. We came before the door of the main house and Leina Wu opened the door. Someone unexpected burst out from within.

“Ohhh, you are finally back! I have been waiting for this!”

“D-Dan Lutim!? Why are you here today?”

I didn’t expect Dan Lutim.

Dan Lutim blocked the path and laughed out loud.

“Well, there’s a rare guest coming, so I’m here to take a look! We will need to discuss about tomorrow anyway!”

“Isn’t Kaslan Lutim handling this? Going by tradition, the house head or heir should stay at home, correct?”

“It’s fine, I will be going home tonight! I don’t need to hunt either, so I’m bored!”

Following the motto of “Going my way”, Dan Lutim brushed off my query and laughed heartily.

He then scratched his bald head and turned his sights to Shumimaru with a grunt.

“So you are that guest from the east!? Hmm! It’s been a while since I last saw a Semu, you people are as black as ever! But your hair is as white as an old man’s!”

This wasn’t in the realm of “Going my way” anymore, it was “No regards for anyone”.

My head started to heat, but Shumimaru didn’t waver at all.

“Easterner, ‘Silver Vase’ merchants’ bandleader, Shumimaru Jiz Sadumutino. Thank you, letting visit, me today.”

“I’m the head of house Lutim, kin of the Wu clan! You don’t need to be so formal either, guest!”

Shouldn't a guest behave properly too?

But Dan Lutim didn't care about all that and backed into the house while shouting:
"Come in, come in."

Waiting inside the house were the clan head Donda Wu, his wife Mama Mia Lei, as well as Jiza Wu and Kaslan Lutim.

"Clan head Donda, I have brought the guest from the eastern kingdom Shumimaru with me."

Leina Wu announced on behalf of the group.

She then extended a hand towards Shumimaru.

"Guest Shumimaru, can you let me safekeep your steel, as I explained during our journey here?"

"Yes."

Shumimaru pulled the cloak on his body aside, revealing clothes with swirly patterns similar to the attire in Forest's Edge. There were all sorts of metallic and gem accessories on his arms and neck and also a crescent-shaped scimitar on his waist. Shumimaru handed the scimitar and his cloak with hidden pockets containing many needles and a pencil-sized dagger to Leina Wu and then bowed to everyone in the hall.

He was taller than Dan Lutim but had an incredibly slender body.

However, his long arms and legs were covered in muscles. His posture was proper, so he didn't give the impression of being weak. This was the Shumimaru, the bandleader of a merchant group, who could withstand the rigors of long journeys across the continent. Shumimaru showed no fear before the powerful hunters from the Wu clan and Lutim house.

"Please come in, guest from the east. Let us get to know each other first."

Mama Mia Lei was all smiles as she sat on the top seat in the hall.

Shumimaru and I took off our shoes and entered the hall. The girls who safekept our steel placed them and the cloak by the clan head and then left the house to forage for

firewood.

“Easterner, ‘Silver Vase’ merchants’ bandleader, Shumimaru Jiz Sadumutino. Thank you, letting visit, me today.”

Shumimaru sat at the bottom seat and repeated what he said earlier.

“The one putting up airs beside me is the head of the Wu clan, Donda Wu. On the other side is our eldest son Jiza Wu. The one who welcomed you is the head of house Lutim, Dan Lutim, and his eldest son, Kaslan Lutim. I’m the wife of the clan head, Mia Lei Wu... Thank you for visiting us for the sake of our daughter Vena Wu, guest from the east Shumimaru and Asuta.”

Shumimaru and I bowed quietly.

Mama Mia Lei was all smiles, but Donda Wu still had a scary face. I couldn’t tell what Jiza Wu was thinking either. Dan Lutim was smiling cheerfully like Ebisu, and the calm Kaslan Lutim made me feel at ease.

“And so, I want to understand first. Dear guest Shumimaru, why are you so worried about Vena’s health? Leina might have asked you the same though. Vena isn’t hurt too bad and can go to town the day after tomorrow.”

“But, day after tomorrow, I gone. I, morning three days later, Genos, go from. Back next, half year... No meet day after tomorrow, no meet half year.”

“And how would that be an inconvenience to you? I heard that you two don’t really know each other well.”

“Inconvenience, no... Just meet, I want.”

Shumimaru sat with his legs crossed and looked straight at Mama Mia Lei.

Dan Lutim who seemed happier than Mama Mia Lei laughed loudly.

“I never thought that someone in town will be interested in a woman of Forest’s Edge! Anyway, you want to take Vena Wu as your wife, right, guest from the east?”

He was so direct that even a bystander like me broke out in cold sweat.

Shumimaru seemed to have made up his mind and squinted a little.

“Marry... hard. Vena Wu, me, different faith. I, Semu, Vena Wu, Selva.”

“Fufu, so you are saying you will marry her if you worship the same god?”

“Assumption, meaningless. Vena Wu, incredible woman. Semu, no have, like Vena Wu, charming girl. Definitely, because, denizen of Forest’s Edge, she is.”

“Right. But not many women in the Forest’s Edge have a figure like hers! So it’s only natural that she enamored you with her looks!”

Shumimaru tilted his head slightly and asked: “Looks? Looks, charm, unrelated. Vena Wu charming, because of heart.”

“Oh...? I didn’t speak with that girl much, so I’m not sure about her heart! But she is beautiful, right?”

“Beautiful... Vena Wu, appearance, beautiful?”

I was shocked.

However, Shumimaru had serious eyes.

“Semu thinks, slim, beautiful. Vena Wu, no slim. Semu, no think, Vena Wu, beautiful.”

“What!? She isn’t exactly slim, but that’s the perfect sense of meatiness for a woman! Dear guest, there is no woman in this world as tempting as she!”

“Please stop for a while, Dan Lutim. It’s awkward for me and the clan head to listen to you saying this as your old friend.”

“Don’t worry! I have given all my love to my late wife! I won’t remarry again!”

Dan Lutim said with a hearty laugh, while Mama Mia Lei sighed and replied: “That’s not the problem.”

At this moment, Jiza Wu spoke:

“Guest from the east, why are you so obsessed with my sister? Your relationship with

her is superficial, and you don't think she is charming enough to be your wife. So I don't think you have any reason to be so obsessed with her."

"I think, charming, she is. Vena Wu, amazing. Appearance, no pretty, but Vena Wu, cute."

Shumimaru said calmly without showing his emotions.

"No, appearance, charming too. Vena Wu, beautiful eyes. Mesmerizing smile. Enchanting voice... Marry her, difficult. But Vena Wu, charming."

"Even if you find her charming, there is no point in the relationship between man and woman if it doesn't involve marriage. I don't know what are the customs in town, but this is the reality in Forest's Edge."

"Yes! Jiza Wu, we actually thought of the same thing! I think so too! Friendship does bond men and women sometimes, but what are you seeking from Vena Wu, guest?"

Dan Lutim stroked his beard as he leaned forth.

"You neither plan to wed Vena Wu nor marry into Forest's Edge; what's the point of deepening this relationship? Do you want to be Vena Wu's friend? Or have a one-night stand?"

Shumimaru was stumped for the first time.

He then replied: "Don't know. But, see her, I want. Painful, I feel, if no see her. That's all... Sorry, shallow thinking."

"That's so shallow! But your feelings are deep!"

Dan Lutim laughed cheerfully after saying that.

"Driven by vague emotions, someone from town visited Forest's Edge. What a surprise! Donda Wu, just how charming is your daughter!"

"Enough with your blabbering. You are a guest too, so behave yourself."

Donda Wu spoke for the first time.

He stared holes into Shumimaru with his fiery blue eyes.

“Easterner, for the past eight decades, no denizen of Forest’s Edge had tied the knot with someone outside our tribe. That is the case for westerners, much lest easterners.”

“Yes.”

“And the Forest’s Edge won’t permit ridiculous things like a one-night stand. Man and woman can only be bonded by marriage.”

“Yes.”

“If you understand, do with her what you will.”

After Donda Wu finished speaking, he stood his huge body up.

“As the head of the Wu clan, I’m grateful that you made the trip here out of concern for my daughter’s health... Hearth tender of the Fa house, are you here for Vena too?”

“Y-Yes.”

“Hmm... Hey, take them inside. I will continue sleeping until those guys from the Sauti and Zaza clans come.”

That last bit was directed towards Mama Mia Lei.

Mama Mia Lei looked up at her husband’s annoyed face and smile: “I understand, clan head.”

“What, you are sleeping? You sure like to sleep! Who is going to tend to us when you are asleep, Donda Wu?”

With the parting line “Annoying,” Donda Wu disappeared down the corridor to the right.

Mama Mia Lei stood up as she watched him leave.

“Dear guest Shumimaru, I will bring you to my daughter’s room. Jiza, please entertain our guests for a while.”

And so, we headed down the left corridor, opposite where Donda Wu went.

Grandma Jiba's chamber was in the right too, so this was the first time I headed down this way. Just like what I remembered, the corridor extended 10 meters or so, with three doors along the wall. Mama Mia Lei knocked the door closest to us.

"Vena, the clan head gave his permission, so I brought our guest Shumimaru over. Asuta is here too, can they go in?"

After about 10 seconds of silence, Mama Mia Lei was about to knock again when the door was slid to the side violently.

"Yo, Asuta! It's great that Dad didn't punch our guest!"

It wasn't Vena Wu, but Ludo Wu.

And he was holding Jiza Wu's son Kota Wu in his arms for some reason. The infant's pure and black eyes were looking at Shumimaru and me curiously.

"Hey, can someone watch over Kota for now?"

"Yes. Kota, come play with grandma."

Mama Mia Lei smiled brilliantly and rubbed the cheeks of the toddler. Kota laughed happily in response.

"Yeah, I remember your hair that is as white as Grandma Jiba's. Dear guest, I'm the youngest son of the Wu clan, Ludo Wu. Nice to meet you."

"I, Shumimaru Jiz Sadumutino. Seen you, I have."

"Well, I worked as an escort in the Post Station Town for a long time... Let me say this first, my father permitted you to see Vena-nee because he trusts you. If you betray his trust, I will definitely kill you."

Ludo Wu tapped his waist.

Hanging there was the new dagger that he bought after that incident with Tay Tsun.

"You might be good, but you are no match for me. I heard that Semu use poison, so if

you make any strange moves, I will kill you on the spot... Anyway, can you promise to stay more than an arm's length away from Vena-nee?"

"Promise, I will."

"Yes, please do. I don't want to dirty my own house with blood... And that goes for you too; Asuta, don't do anything weird."

I won't do anything like that... I thought and just considered this a mandatory process.

If my judgment of character was off, and Shumimaru was actually scheming to harm the Wu clan, then Vena Wu would be in danger because of me. Donda Wu's arrangement actually placed a lot of trust in Shumimaru.

"Come in then. This is Vena-nee's room, so it is really girly, hence, be prepared, alright?"

Ludo Wu backed away, and we finally entered the room.

There wasn't anything very feminine about this place, but it was filled with flowery fragrance.

Just like Grandma Jiba's chamber, the room was tatami big. There was only one big cabinet taking an entire wall, with daily necessities placed on it. However, this room still had the air and style of a women's quarters, which made it hard for us to calm down.

On the other walls were brightly-colored clothes, decorated with flowers and a deep fragrance.

Women's accessories were adorned on top of them. These were probably used for their banquet dress. From afar, they seemed to be sparkling metal or stones. The shimmering rainbow light must be from their veils and sashes.

Not only was there a cloth hanging on the wall as decoration, there was also flimsy cloth with swirly patterns there—probably the girl's laundry.

This had to be the room she shared with her other sisters. There were plenty of clothes here, with most of them looking like lingerie or swimsuit. But this was the attire normally worn in Forest's Edge, so there was nothing to be shy about... Yet, I still felt

as if I had stumbled into a forbidden garden.

And the owner of this forbidden garden was lying elegantly in the room.

There were several cushions on the bed, and the thicc body lying on it belonged to Vena Wu.

She supported her head with her right hand, with her body facing us like a sleeping Buddha. There was nothing special about her posture, but it accentuated the curves on her body.

Her eyes were narrowed into a slit as usual, and there wasn't any expression on her face. Her injured right ankle was wrapped in light grey bandages. There was some sort of herb medicine under it, and I could smell a faint refreshing and stimulating fragrance that was a bit unlike flowers.

"Sorry for my untidy appearance... My butt will hurt if I keep sitting down..."

"It's fine, don't worry. It's really unfortunate, Vena Wu."

I sat down in the middle of the room.

Shumimaru sat beside me, while Ludo Wu sat down very close to Vena Wu, opposite us.

"Vena Wu, visit, sudden, sorry."

Shumimaru quietly lowered his head.

Vena Wu didn't reply.

Maybe I was just imagining it, but her eyes looked a little annoyed. This atmosphere definitely wasn't welcoming Shumimaru.

After that, silence engulfed the place. Be it Shumimaru or Vena Wu, they just stared at each other without a word.

Time crawled slowly like a snail, and Ludo Wu who couldn't stand the silence finally said:

“Erm, didn’t you have business with Vena-nee? The Zaza and Sauti clans will be coming in a while, so I can’t stay with you for too long.”

“Time, no have?”

“There is still some time left.”

“Thank you, precious time, give me.”

But the silence continued.

“Erm... If you are not going to do anything, can you please leave...?”

Vena Wu said coldly.

Shumimaru tilted his head puzzledly.

“Thing, I am doing.”

“What thing... You mean... looking at each other without saying a word...?”

“Yes. I, morning, three days later, Genos, leave. Vena Wu, carved in heart, mind, I want.”

If he said it more fluently, this would be a great line.

But I thought this was the best that the introverted and honest Shumimaru could do to convey his true feelings.

However, Vena Wu looked annoyed.

“Fufu. When Vena-nee is able to walk by herself, she can go to town. That might occur the day after tomorrow. Wouldn’t this make a wasted trip for you?”

Ludo Wu said on behalf of his silent sister, while Shumimaru narrowed his eyes in a satisfied manner.

“Good, if we meet, day after tomorrow. Your injury, heal well, I hope.”

“I don’t understand... If it is a proposal, I can just turn it down. What should I do in a situation like this...?”

Vena Wu used her free left hand to fidget with her brown hair.

“You are not here to propose marriage... or a one-nightstand... or to be friends... Then why are you here...?”

Huh? I almost fell down from surprise.

However, Shumimaru’s expression remained the same.

Shumimaru stared at Vena Wu and then took off an accessory he was wearing on his right wrist.

“Vena Wu, gift, accept can you?”

“...”

“Stone, misfortune, keep away. Hope, Vena Wu, ever healthy.”

It was a silver locket, with several fingernail-sized pink-colored stones embedded in it.

The workmanship looked a little similar to the blue stone necklace that I gave Ai Fa.

Ludo Wu glanced at the silent Vena Wu and then said:

“...What will you do, Vena-nee? If you want it, I can safekeep it for you.”

Vena Wu propped herself up, exerting the same aura as Donda Wu did earlier. While seated sideways, she said quietly:

“But why...? I can’t accept a gift from someone I’m not close with...”

“Vena Wu, ever healthy, I wish you. Sad I will, if hurt, Vena Wu is, after leave.”

“...”

“Return gift, no need. Vena Wu, happiness, I hope.”

“Since he is giving it to you, just take it. If you don’t want it, just throw it away.”

Ludo Wu yawned, as if he was bored by this interaction.

Vena Wu whose head was slightly lowered glared at Shumimaru through her long fringe.

“...Are you mocking me...?”

Shumimaru blinked blankly.

“Mock? Understand, I do not.”

“Why are you wishing for my happiness...? I thought you’re not interested in fat women...?”

As I thought!

Ludo Wu scratched his blonde hair and mumbled: “The cat’s out of the bag, huh.”

These two siblings definitely eavesdropped on the conversation in the hall.

“Since I’m so fat... no one wants to marry me. I will just end up as a middle-aged woman who’s only good for her strength...”



“That’s not true; didn’t you turn down all those men who proposed to you, Vena-nee?”

“Yes... So leave me alone...”

Vena Wu leaned weakly onto the wall behind her.

When he saw her do that, Ludo Wu grunted and stroked his smooth chin.

“It’s almost time, dear guests. I’m sorry, but that’s all for today.”

Shumimaru replied “Yes,” and then lowered his gaze with the accessory clutched tightly in his hand.

He stood up, bowed quietly at Vena Wu, and turned around.



“Sorry about that. She had a fever yesterday, and even discounting that, she had been grounded at home for two days. That’s why Vena-nee isn’t in a good mood. However... she had always been frail.”

After leaving the room and closing the door, Ludo Wu started talking.

“She is especially bad at affairs of the heart. Because of her looks, Vena-nee had been wooed by tens of men before. That’s why... she would get incredibly depressed after turning down someone. In the end, she became a woman that no man dares to approach.”

Ludo Wu smiled and showed his white teeth as he spoke about Vena Wu’s sad past.

“But this is the first time Vena-nee met a man who doesn’t think she is pretty; that’s why she is so upset. She almost exploded with rage when she heard that while eavesdropping. So this is her limit for today.”

“...Yes.”

“Well, do you want me to pass this to Vena-nee?”

Ludo Wu looked at Shumimaru’s clenched right fist.

But Shumimaru shook his head and answered: “No need.”

“Day after tomorrow, Vena Wu, I give. If no meet, give up.”

“I see. Shumimaru, you sure are an interesting man.”

Ludo Wu said as he lightly tapped Shumimaru’s chest with his fist.

“It will be fun if you marry into the Forest’s Edge. But that isn’t a simple matter either. But... If you truly wish for Vena-nee to be happy, I can’t bring myself to hate you. Farewell then.”

Part 3

“Huh? Mia Lei Wu, is it just you alone?”

When I returned to the hall, only Mama Mia Lei was there.

“Yes, a large group of guests arrived. The house is too small, so I asked them to wait outside.”

A large group of guests?

But this was the Wu clan main house, which was big enough to house twelve people and a toddler. Even if Graff Zaza, Dali Sauti, and their followers came, they should be able to fit inside the hall.

“Aside from the two tribe chiefs, there were also some men that I don’t really recognize. They seemed very agitated too; I hope there won’t be any commotions... Oh right, Ai Fa is with them too.”

“Huh? Ai Fa?”

I felt even more lost.

Anyway, we retrieved the cloak and steel that Shumimaru deposited and went outside.

What awaited for us were fearsome Forest’s Edge men— more than ten of them. The main house was indeed too small for these many people.

Donda Wu, who was holed up in his room until this time, cast a sideways glance at us: “Done with your business?”

Standing beside him were Jiza Wu, Dan Lutim, Kaslan Lutim... as well as Dali Sauti and Graff Zaza who reached when I wasn’t aware. These tribal chiefs also brought followers along, so there were eight of them.

Ai Fa and six men stood on the other side, as if they were opposing them.

When Ai Fa saw me, she nodded as if she was saying “Thank you for your hard work”. I felt relieved from the sight of her calm face.

“Is that the easterner guest visiting the Wu clan?”

One of the three tribal chiefs, Graff Zaza of the Zaza house said it with his thick and hoarse voice.

No matter how many people there were, the men from the Zaza house were prominent with the kiba heads they wore on their heads. And this guy was as buff as Donda Wu too.

“The Wu clan is free to invite whomever they want. But we are busy now, so please leave.”

“Alright, I go. Clan head, Donda Wu, today, thank you.”

Shumimaru deftly evaded Graff Zaza’s gaze and bowed towards Donda Wu.

I grabbed Shumimaru who was about to leave by the arm.

“Wait, Shumimaru. Erm... Can we talk for a while?”

I didn’t know why I said that. But I didn’t want Shumimaru to leave just like that.

“Asuta, talk, no mind. Happy, I am.”

“Erm, what should we talk about...”

I couldn’t just leave Ai Fa alone in this situation either.

As I was looking around me, Shumimaru pointed with his thin fingers at the wagon parked beside the Wu house.

“I wait. Where can’t hear, but can see you.”

“Ah, thank you very much.”

As expected of a caravan band leader that traveled the world, Shumimaru walked undauntedly towards the wagon under the doubtful gazes of the Forest’s Edge men.

When he was far away enough, Graff Zaza faced the men I wasn’t familiar with again.

“...I got the gist of what you want to say. It’s regarding the number of people and the

representatives we will be sending tomorrow, right?”

“Yes. Can you understand, tribal chiefs?”

The one who answered Graff Zaza was a small-sized man with a monkey-like face, the house head of the Sudora house.

On a closer look, I saw a few familiar faces. On the other side of Ai Fa was the head of the Fou house, and beside him should be the head of the Lan house. Were all of them from minor houses?

“We will submit to the decision of the tribal chiefs and won’t take the capability and judgment of the tribal chiefs lightly. However, we won’t just follow blindly like our time under the Tsun clan. We want to see what the tribal chiefs see, hear what they hear, and work hand in hand with them.”

The head of the Fou house continued where the Sudora head left off.

He seemed about Donda Wu’s age and was tall and skinny.

“Hmm, so not just the conference tomorrow, you also want the rights to discuss these issues with the three tribal chiefs?”

One of the three tribal chiefs, Dali Sauti said in a dignified manner that was beyond his age. His build was on par with the other tribal chiefs too.

On a second observation, I noticed that there was a prominent difference between the chiefs and the others.

First, the number of tusks and horns hanging on their necks was vastly different. Next was their attire. The clothes on the minor houses were a little worn out.

The biggest difference was their body shape and aura.

Including kins like the Lutim, the tribal chiefs were all buffed and full of might. In comparison, the minor houses might have the ferocity and intimidation befitting a hunter of the Forest’s Edge, there was an air of poverty about them.

The minor houses basically lived from hand to mouth, and it showed in their body and aura.

However, the smallest sized Sudora house head answered Dali Sauti without fear: "That's right."

"And we will convey the content of the discussions to the other house heads too. If we can spread the word to the north and south ends of Forest's Edge, we won't need to wait for the annual house head conference to learn the intent of the tribal chiefs."

"Are you afraid of us falling into depravity like the Tsun clan?"

Graff Zaza said in a heavy tone. He wasn't trying to intimidate others, but there was an indescribable tension in the air whenever he spoke.

But even so, the head of the Sudora house didn't back down. He shook his head and answered with a shake of his head: "No."

"The Wu clan, Sauti clan, and Zaza house will keep watch over each other, and it's impossible for the three chiefs to become depraved at the same time. However, when we headed to the Post Station Town to protect Asuta of the Fa house together with the men from the Wu clan during that incident a few days ago, I happened to hear something."

"And then we, the Fou and Lan houses, learned what the Sudora house head discovered. We heard that... Graff Zaza thinks we should cut off ties with the city and desert the Morga Forest's Edge. Is that true?"

When he heard what the heads of the Sudora and Fou said, Graff Zaza narrowed his eyes.

"I didn't say we must desert this place. But I think we should give up on life in this place if we have to throw away our honor of living as humans."

The minor house heads started getting rowdy.

The head of the Fou house glared at Graff Zaza with serious eyes.

"This is a shocking revelation. To give up this land we have lived on for eighty years... Are the nobles of Genos so heartless?"

"I only spoke with an old man named Pyschkurewuss. The denizens of Forest's Edge offered our blades to the Lord of Genos, not that old man... If that man holds our

blades, I will not hesitate in taking them back.”

A carnivorous light burned in Graff Zaza’s eyes.

“I also think that if we don’t meet with the Lord of Genos and continue being shunned by others, we would fall into depravity like the Zattsu Tsun and Zuro Tsun too. Then giving up on the honor of being ‘kiba hunters’ and seeking a new land will be the right path to take.”

“To be so rash after just one meeting... I don’t think we need to say this, but Graff Zaza, you are also regretting your frivolous words too, correct? So we don’t need to worry about us deserting this place so hastily.”

Graff Zaza clicked his tongue after hearing Dali Sauti’s words.

“Also, Graff Zaza’s view isn’t completely baseless. If our goal doesn’t coincide with Genos, we won’t be able to work together with them. If the Lord of Genos refuses any compromise and continues supporting Pyschkurewuss, there will be no choice but to abandon the Morga Forest. However... We can’t come to a hasty conclusion without understanding the true intents of the landlord.”

“What kind of person is this Pyschkurewuss...? After hearing what you said, there is all the more reason for us to work closely together with the tribal chiefs. Not many people will be willing to abandon the Morga Forest without knowing what is going on.”

The Sudora head said quietly in a gloomy voice.

“And that isn’t all. We need to be on the same page with the tribal chiefs regarding the Fa house’s stall.”

I was surprised when my house was mentioned.

Ai Fa remained silent, while the head of the Fou house beside her took a step forward in uncharacteristic enthusiasm.

“Don’t the three tribal chiefs hold different opinions towards the Fa house’s business? The Wu clan’s members are employed by the Fa house, the Sauti clan is neutral, while the Zaza house is against it. Despite what the Zaza house thinks, the Fa house’s business won’t be forbidden, correct?”

“You got a problem with that?”

“No, I’m just thinking that the tribal chiefs need to know if their opinion holds water.”

The Lan house continued after the Fou head:

“I also think the tribal chiefs need to know our thoughts about this.”

The head of the Sudora said:

“Present here are six houses: Sudora, Fou, Lan, Latzu, Gazu, and Beim. Our homes are quite close to the Fa house, and, aside from the Beim, we all concur with the Fa house’s actions. We have also learned bloodletting and cooking delicious food from them. However, after the house head conference, the houses that live further away are living the same impoverished life as before.”

“There’s something wrong with that?”

In response to Dali Sauti’s calm words, the Sudora head replied: “Yes.”

“During the house head conference, we agreed to observe the Fa house quietly and judge if their actions are poison or medicine to the Forest’s Edge. But in just twenty or so days after the house head conference, our lives have changed drastically.”

“You are saying that the kiba sold by the Fa house has brought us a prosperous life?”

“It’s nowhere near prosperous yet, but the fact remains that we have obtained a staggering amount of copper plates. To be honest, I am doubting if it was right for us to get so much copper plates just by making that amount of jerky. And the head of the Beim is adamant that the denizens of Forest’s Edge shouldn’t earn this wealth.”

This was the first time I heard of the Beim house.

Aside from the kins of the Zaza house, they opposed the actions of the Fa house the most strongly of all the minor houses.

“The Fa house claims that they are doing business in order to bring prosperity to Forest’s Edge. This means that it will involve the whole Forest’s Edge. So parties from both the for and against camps should witness what the Fa house is doing and determine for themselves whether this will become medicine or poison for Forest’s Edge.”

It was slowly devolving into a monologue by the Sudora house.

The head of the Sudora house continued speaking to the tribal chiefs who were one size bigger than him:

“As a fellow denizen of the Forest’s Edge, I think the Wu clan, Zaza house, and Sauti clan are too wealthy. Wealthy people won’t understand the thinking of poor families, and impoverished folks won’t understand the worries of rich denizens. I think the head of the Fa house is unbiased because she experienced poverty in her youth and became wealthy by her own abilities.”

Ai Fa appeared annoyed when she heard that. My mistress didn’t take compliments from others well and was introverted.

“The thinking of the impoverished folks, huh. But no matter how wealthy a clan is, we won’t look down on impoverished houses.”

The Sudora house head looked with serious eyes at Dali Sauti who was tilting his head.

“Then let me ask you, Sauti clan head. Have you ever lost a child to starvation before? Have you ever had thoughts: ‘If I let my wife eat the fruits hanging before her, she will be able to nurse my child’? Have you ever lamented your own failures as you watched your child wither away day by day?”

“...N-No.”

“Then can you understand our hatred for the Tsun clan? In addition to not hunting and splurging the bonus money in leisure, they even laid their hands on the grace of the forest. Can you, wealthy clans, understand how we felt when we decided to forgive them?”

Dali Sauti was silent.

The head of the Sudora house took a deep breath and said quietly:

“However, letting the tribal chief fall into depravity is the sin of all denizens of Forest’s Edge for being weak. I think what Donda Wu said is very just. During previous house head conferences, when the Wu clan was trying to bring the Tsun clan to task, I didn’t do anything to help... So I agree with Donda Wu. After hearing his thoughts, I have slowly come around to forgiving the Tsun clan. If I didn’t listen to his explanation and

was simply told to forgive the Tsun clan, I probably wouldn't have yielded to the demands of the three tribal chiefs."

"..."

"I believe the tribal chiefs will lead us towards the right path. However, I hope we can also see what the tribal chiefs see, hear what they hear, and walk down the same path... The demise of the Tsun clan, the rise of the new tribal chiefs, and the Fa house's business in the Post Station Town. With so many changes happening in such a short time, can our lives continue as before?"

After the Sudora head finished, silence engulfed the entire place.

The one who broke this silence was Donda Wu who had been listening quietly.

"...Simply put, your request right now is for a representative to participate in all tribal chiefs conferences that concern the future of Forest's Edge, correct?"

"Yes, that's right. Just like the tribal chiefs disseminating the information to their kin houses, we will also spread this information to the other minor houses."

"You want all seven people here to join in?"

"Of course not, just two will be enough. If possible, I hope that the heads of the Fou and Beim houses can participate."

"Hmm... I have no reason to reject."

Donda Wu looked at the two tribal chiefs beside him.

"I'm only worried about one thing. Worrying about unnecessary things might affect your work as hunters."

"That also applies to the bloodletting and cooking too. As we discussed at the house head conference, we can't let our goal of leading a prosperous life dally our work."

Dali Sauti answered quietly while Graff Zaza grunted without a word.

The proposal by the minor houses appeared to be accepted by the tribal chiefs.

“That house head suddenly came to the Fa house, saying that they wanted to discuss something with the tribal chiefs and asked me to come along.”

Ai Fa explained in the wagon.

“The heads of the Sudora and Fou houses seemed to have discussed the things mentioned just now a long time ago. When I heard they want to have a meeting in the Wu clan village, I became even more certain about that.”

“I see. This is the first time I heard of the Beim house; are they very against the Fa house’s business?”

I asked as I held onto Gilulu’s reins.

I could feel Ai Fa who was sitting right behind the driver’s seat shaking her head.

“Don’t worry. The Sudora house head said the Beim house only opposed so strongly because they felt uneasy about the recent drastic changes.”

“Is the head of the Sudora house really fine? It’s a bit late to say this, but the first payment we gave for his jerky was quite a tidy sum.”

“It’s fine. They understood that they earned that much copper plates that round because only seven houses took part in the jerky production. That’s why... He said we should let more houses chip in, and share the wealth.”

Dividing the wealth as evenly as possible... Mama Mia Lei and I both shared this opinion, and we had already conveyed this to the head of the Sudora house. His idea was also built on this opinion too.

“Anyway, I want to teach the other houses bloodletting, so the wealth can be distributed to everyone. Then both the support camp and opposition camp can judge whether this is medicine or poison for Forest’s Edge... We should also convey to the three tribal chiefs how we came up with this idea.”

“Yes.”

“I’m also curious about how the three tribal chiefs think too. We should also learn what

their opinions are. That's why we gathered in the Wu clan village."

"Yes, I understand. This opinion really suits the style of Forest's Edge too. I actually feel the same way too. In a sense, this is a brand-new way of thinking that has never occurred to the denizens of Forest's Edge before."

"The head of the Sudora house being a weirdo is probably a factor. The Fou and Lan house must have been convinced by him too."

The head of the Sudora house, huh.

He had a small stature rarely found amongst the men of Forest's Edge and a monkey-like face and belonged to an impoverished family with few members. His kin house had also died out... But even so, the gaze of this middle-aged man still was sharp.

His wife was helping me at the stall, and he also saved me from the hands of Tay Tsun. It remained uncertain whether Tay Tsun was really trying to kill me, but he was still my benefactor.

"But among the representatives of the minor houses isn't Sudora, but the Fou and Beim house heads. I was so agitated, wondering if Ai Fa would get picked."

"Fa house has few members and is busy with chores, so the head of the Sudora house said that he won't burden me with such a heavy responsibility. He also couldn't be away from his house for the same reason. He felt that there should be one house from the supporting and opposition camp, so the Fou house and Beim house were nominated."

"Yes, that's very true. The Sudora house head sure is quick-witted."

The Fou and Beim house heads would be participating in tomorrow's conference too. They were now holding the last meeting in the Wu clan before the actual event tomorrow, while the rest of the house heads headed south to relay this news to the other houses.

The Forest's Edge tribe, that didn't concern themselves with houses that were not related to them by blood, was now actively engaging with each other. This was an attempt to build a social network within this Forest's Edge and its 500 odd-denizens.

They held opposing views, but the fact that the Tsun clan fell into depravity in the last

decade due to a lack of interaction with the other houses spurred them to change their mindset.

“So you understand? Then it’s about time you answer my question.”

Ai Fa leaned forth into the driver’s seat.

“...Why did you invite that easterner to the Fa house?”

Ai Fa wasn’t the only one on the wagon, Shumimaru was there too.

Ai Fa didn’t suppress her volume, and Shumimaru, who was sitting in the wagon, was admiring the scenery outside right now.

“Well, many things happened. I want to cheer Shumimaru up, so I invited him over for dinner.”

Shumimaru was unexpectedly happy when I invited him.

He must have been depressed by how his meeting with Vena Wu went. If Vena Wu’s injury didn’t heal by the day after tomorrow, he would have to part ways with her for a long time without seeing her again.

“...You are not asking him to stay the night, right?”

“No, Shumimaru said he can’t just leave his merchant comrades be and spend the night elsewhere, so don’t worry. Ah... Can you send him back to the Post Station Town with Gilulu later? I can’t ride Gilulu at night yet.”

“Well, that’s better than letting someone I don’t know spend the night at our place. With this wagon, I don’t need to be physically close to someone who isn’t a family member too.”

Ai Fa seemed gleeful; she was probably happy that she could drive the wagon.

After twenty minutes of journey, the Fa house appeared before us.

Even though Gilulu shortened the journey greatly, we still stayed too long at the Wu clan and came back later than usual. Having another person dine with us wasn’t much of a problem though.

“We are here. Shumimaru, welcome to the Fa house.”

I was too embarrassed to call this ‘my humble abode’.

After alighting, Shumimaru looked at the Fa house which was two sizes smaller than the Wu clan.

“Everyone, as expected, southern style.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“House. Style, southern.”

Southern probably refers to the southern kingdom Jaguar.

But which part of it was like a southern style? The houses in the Genos Post Station Town would more or less use materials aside from lumber, but the structure was basically the same as the Forest’s Edge.

At this moment, I remembered. Most of the buildings in the Post Station Town were erected by the Jaguar people, and Pops and his architects also visited Genos to maintain the buildings.

Just like how most buildings in Japan are western style too. How intriguing.

I pondered as I carried the ingredients and pot into the kitchen. Ai Fa tied Gilulu to the tree and said: “Of course.”

“When our ancestors moved to this forest eight decades ago, they tried for a time to build houses with straws as we did in the dark jungles of the south. But there is a lot of rain here and the grass huts decomposed quickly. So they learned from the southerners staying in Genos how to build sturdier houses.”

“I see. Interested, I am.”

It was interesting indeed.

The round ceremonial hall building we saw in the Tsun clan last time was probably the traditional building of the denizens of Forest’s Edge. Let’s ask Grandma Jiba about this some other time.

“And, Forest’s Edge, clothes, eastern. Weaving pattern, from east, spread to Genos.”

“Huh? This pattern was chosen to make it hard for the kiba to spot us in the forest.”

“Yes. But, Morga Forest, big and rich. Source of fiber, wood, many. Denizens of Forest’s Edge, weave strings, cannot?”

“We used to weave our own clothes when we first moved here. But when we learned that the tree barks and fruits were the kiba’s food, we were forbidden from stripping the trees. Easterner... you really like to ask questions.”

“Sorry. Interested in Forest’s Edge, I am. Questions, unhappy, made you?”

“...Not really. I just thought that, contrary to your appearance, you sure can talk.”

“Southerner, daughter of merchant, same thing she said.”

“Daughter of the merchant?”

I grew stiff for a moment, but relaxed when I remembered that Shumimaru shouldn’t have seen me being hit by Dell.

Even then, I should tell Ai Fa about her. Leaving other matters aside, we needed to be wary of people who were close to Pyschkurewuss.

Anyway, even Ai Fa who was not good at dealing with others had no trouble talking with Shumimaru. It was a pleasant surprise for me.

90 minutes later, we dined in the Fa house which was a little dim.

“Sorry for the wait, I hope the taste is to your liking.”

I cooked dinner while preparing the ingredients to be sold tomorrow and finally finished dinner at the usual time. Roughly 30% of the food prep work wasn’t finished, so I would have to work on them after Shumimaru goes back. I didn’t need to sacrifice any sleep to finish the work, so it wasn’t a big deal.

“Fragrant, very nice.”

The meat dish was cooked in the stove outside. Shumimaru squinted happily when I

brought the finished product in.

Ai Fa who was in the seat of honor sat with one knee up and frowned.

“...Asuta, I noticed that you used that red fruit again.”

“Yes, but I didn’t make the food too spicy, so don’t worry. It doesn’t look as spicy as [Kiba Chitto] , correct?”

“It’s the same, it’s entirely red.”

“I told you it is fine. It’s red because of the tarapa.”

And as a special service, Ai Fa’s portion was made to be milder.

I smiled at the scowling Ai Fa, scooped up the vegetable stew I heated up at the stove in the house, and then returned to my seat.

The side dish was the usual grilled poitan and kiba soup seasoned with Tau sauce. I added thigh meat, aria, and Chitto into the soup. The taste was similar to Kenchin soup, and I wondered if this dish would be popular in the [Big Tree of the South Inn] .

The main dish was grilled meat with Chitto.

How should I name it? If I had to call it something, [Kiba sauté- Arrabbiata style] would be appropriate. This was the result of my research for a dish that was on par with the [Kiba Chitto] made with pickled Chitto.

Chitto fruit was an ingredient similar to chili in both color and spiciness. It was spherical and about the size of a soybean. Two or three of it were equivalent to one red chili, so it wasn’t too expensive either.

I sliced the Chitto and myam and then fried it with kiba oil over a small fire. I thought about using vegetable oil as a replacement for olive oil, but I couldn’t find any vegetable oil in the Post Station Town. I wondered if there was any inside the city.

The myam gave a nice fragrance when fried over a weak fire. I then shifted it to a mid-fire stove and quickly cooked the sliced kiba loin meat and aria. After the meat was cooked, I poured tarapa sauce that was stewing in another pot, and it was done.

When in doubt I would turn to tarapa. After the tarapa vegetable stew and [Kiba burger] , I made the third dish with tarapa sauce. I wanted to add more variety, but, given how well the tomato-like tarapa meshed with the chili-like Chitto, this vegetable dish was the best choice.

If I let Leina Wu take over part of the preparation work, I could use my free time to try more ingredients. In short, if I could bring the tarapa sauce I made ahead of time to town, I could shorten the time spent in the [[Cryptic Venerable Inn]] greatly.

I had to pay due care and attention to the heat strength. I needed to heat the Chitto long enough to bring out its spiciness and had to take care not to let it turn mushy. With that in mind, cooking it was a simple matter.

“I plan to sell this dish in the [[Cryptic Venerable Inn]] next month. I will be delighted if Shumimaru can taste this dish before leaving Genos.”

“Happy, I am too.”

Ai Fa scowled her mouth, as if implying she was the only unhappy one.

But the dish today wouldn't be spicy enough to make her cry. I added less Chitto into Ai Fa's share and even removed the seeds, so the taste should be mild. I held expectations in my heart that this meal might make Ai Fa happy.

Ai Fa mumbled something quietly, while I said: “Rub a dub dub, thanks for the grub.”; Shumimaru said: “Thank you for the meal.” and after all three of us said grace in our own way, we started to dine.

I scooped up a spoonful of the main dish and sent it to my mouth.

And I tilted my head with a: “Huh?”

The tomato-like tarapa sauce was cooked together with the diced aria and fruit wine, so the style and sweetness were just perfect. The fragrance of the myam and the spiciness of the Chitto mixed together harmoniously, giving it a texture that was on par with [Kiba Chitto] .

The source of this thick texture was the kiba.

The loin meat known for its tenderness had great texture. The crunchy aria was a fine too.

But this taste felt less strong than I remembered.

It was spicy, but it was the milder version, closer to what I made for Ai Fa.

My taste buds had probably grown blunt after tasting so many different dishes. I was a little worried about my dish and stole a peek at Shumimaru.

“Erm, sorry, but does it taste too bland?”

“No, delicious it is.”

Shumimaru was already trying the tender grilled meat. I felt relieved after seeing him squint his eyes happily.

What about Ai Fa? I turned my gaze towards her... and found Ai Fa holding the plate with quivering shoulders.

“...Asuta, you lied to me.”

“Hmm? What’s the matter? It’s not as spicy as before, correct?”

After saying that, I noticed.

The dish I ate was the milder one.

“Ah, did I mixed up our plates?”

No, I couldn’t have messed that up. Aside from Shumimaru, whether this dish would please Ai Fa was the thing which was most important to me.

I tilted my head and wondered what was going on, and Shumimaru did the same.

“Asuta, Ai Fa, plate taste, different?”

“Yes. I added less Chitto in Ai Fa’s share...”

“Ai Fa, plate, switch.”

“Huh?”

“When Asuta, soup take, from stove, back face us. Ai Fa plate switch, then.”

“What!? Why did Ai Fa do that!?”

“Ash, from stove, Asuta plate, fell. Ai Fa, remove ash, plate switch.”

So ash from the stove fell onto my plate. Ai Fa noticed it, so she cleared away the ash and switched my share with hers, huh.

What a gentle house head!

The gods were cruel to let such a gentle and kind house head suffer like this.

“Sorry, Ai Fa, this is your actual share... That hurts!”

She pinched my left cheek hard.

And she kept crying as she pinched me.

“It’s all your fault for changing the taste! Don’t do unnecessary things, moron!”

“But if it all tastes the same, it will be spicy for everyone... Hey, that really hurts!”

“I’m the one who is hurting!”

She was going to tear my cheek off.

But my gentle house head let go before the skin came off.

I was driven to tears just like my beloved mistress. This was all because we were concerned about each other; I could only lament this illogical world.

Ai Fa snorted like a kid beside me and wiped her tears with the back of her palm. Shumimaru said calmly while observing her cuteness: “Blissful, two of you are.”

“I, family, no have. I think, blissful, Asuta and Ai Fa is.”

“Huh? Shumimaru’s family had also passed on?”

“Yes. Mother, died, soon after I born. Father, passed, three years ago. I then, ‘Silver Vase’

leader, inherit.”

“Ah, so the previous band leader was Shumimaru’s father.”

After switching plates with Ai Fa, I endured the spiciness as I answered.

“‘Silver Vase’, my father, founded. I, ten years, work. Permission, work, Genos city, five years... I know Lord Pyschkurewuss, then.”

Ai Fa who was drinking the soup with teary eyes raised her eyebrow.

“Easterner, so you are acquainted with the noble Pyschkurewuss from the city?”

“Yes. Through chef, in city, know Pyschkurewuss. Since 5 years, Pyschkurewuss, buy blades, many.”

Ai Fa gave me a death stare, so I answered quickly: “I only learned about this today.”

But why was Shumimaru mentioning this again?

“Lord Pyschkurewuss, break contract. Many, rumors, bad. Rumors, I not sure, but friend chef, scared, Lord Pyschkurewuss. Lord Pyschkurewuss, powerful.”

“...And so?”

“Defy, Lord Pyschkurewuss, danger. I worry, denizens of Forest’s Edge.”

Shumimaru shouldn’t have heard the conversation with the tribal chiefs just now. But he probably sensed danger from the questions I asked during the journey back from the Post Station Town.

“Anyway... This has nothing to do with you, easterner. You might be Asuta’s friend, but that’s exactly why you shouldn’t get involved with some things.”

Ai Fa shook her head a little and picked up the plate with grilled meat.

“You are leaving the Post Station Town in a few days, right? Then don’t bother with all this and worry more about yourself.”

“Yes. I know... what to do, I need.”

Shumimaru lowered his gaze with a little loneliness in his eyes.

Ai Fa grunted softly and then put the meat covered in red sauce in her mouth.

She then started tearing up.

“Huh? Is it still spicy? I already added much less spices.”

“...The first mouthful was already painful, and it’s hurting me more now.”

Ai Fa kicked my knee while seated.

But she didn’t put down the plate but carried on eating as she wiped her tears.

“Hmm... I don’t know if it tastes good... If the first mouthful wasn’t so painful, I would definitely have found it tasty...”

“Really? That makes me really happy.”

I couldn’t help smiling.

She then kicked me harder many more times.

“I think, Asuta, Ai Fa, blissful.”

Shumimaru said the same thing again.

“This bliss, please treasure. I pray, you two, on journey.”

Ai Fa’s face turned as red as tarapa sauce as she said: “Annoying” loudly.

Time then passed slowly and leisurely until Shumimaru left the Fa house.

Chapter 3

Part 1

The next day, the 30th day of the Blue month.

After half a month, the second conference between the tribal chiefs of Forest's Edge and the noble of Genos Pyschkurewuss occurred.

Not all things could be resolved today.

Or rather, this was the beginning of new troubles.

In order to correct the twisted relationship between Forest's Edge and Genos and to uncover the schemes of Pyschkurewuss, Donda Wu and his tribemates came to town with the future of Forest's Edge on their shoulders.

Did Pyschkurewuss really exploit the Tsun clan to further his own ends?

What was he trying to do by demanding for the entire Tsun clan to be handed over to the city?

What actions would Kamyua Yost and Malfreed take?

Could the denizens of Forest's Edge continue to hunt in the Morga Forest?

Would the Fa house's business in the Post Station Town continue?

This might not be the day when all these issues were resolved, but it was definitely a turning point.

In the end, what we needed to do remained the same.

As usual, we came to town and sold our food. Aside from the two hunters serving as our guards, everything else remained the same.

The townsfolk of the Post Station Town didn't seem to know that such a conference would be held today, and the customer flow appeared the same. There were thirty-odd customers queuing before we opened the stall, and we took turns to rest two at a time after the rush hour was over. Customers visited every now and then during the off-peak period, and things were the same as usual.

"Dad and the others should be here soon."

The one speaking leisurely at the back of the stall was Ludo Wu. To avoid spooking the townsfolk of Post Station Town, young people with mild faces were assigned as escorts.

The other guard was standing between the two stalls and sweeping the streets with her gaze calmly. She was the head of my Fa house, Ai Fa. Now was the hunting offseason for the Wu clan and they could afford to spare the manpower, but Ai Fa still volunteered for this assignment.

There probably wasn't any need for escorts this time. Unless relationships between Genos and us fractured irreparably, the guards wouldn't need to do anything.

On the other hand, the fact that escorts were assigned showed how fragile the relations between Forest's Edge and the city was.

"Ah, it's Ludo Wu!"

An energetic voice suddenly called out.

Then, a person ran towards the stall. It was the daughter of Dora the vegetable peddler, Tara.

When he saw her, Ludo Wu who was near the wagon answered: "Yo!" and approached her.

"Long time no see, brat. Don't you need to work at the stall in the morning?"

"Yes! Papa asked me to run an errand at the inn!"

Tara, who had a caramel-brown hair and eyes, smiled cheerfully. She became a regular when I first opened the stall and was no longer afraid of the denizens of Forest's Edge at the other stall.

“...Ludo Wu, don't leave your post. You want to get attacked from the back?”

Ai Fa admonished him quietly.

But Ludo Wu just tilted his head puzzledly with a: “Huh?”

“There's no need to be so uptight, correct? If we needed to be so wary, we would have sent 3 or 4 escorts right from the start.”

“That might be so, but isn't it only normal to maximize the efficiency with the manpower available to us?”

“It's fine. The Totos and wagon is the wall behind us. We will know right away if someone approaches us from the rear.”

“You... want to use Gilulu as a shield!? Never mind... I'm going to the back.”

From their conversation, it was clear that Ai Fa was the only one on guard the entire morning.

Unlike that time with Zattsu Tsun and Tay Tsun, we were not expecting anyone to attack us. And the conference was scheduled to start at noon, so there was no reason to expect any troubles in the morning.

I was worried about Ai Fa, so I left the stall to Lala Wu who was chatting with Ludo Wu and Tara and walked towards Ai Fa.

“Ai Fa, what's wrong? You are acting weird since we came to town.”

Ai Fa caressed Gilulu who was tied to the tree and glared at me sideways.

“...I sense a strange gaze since morning. A malicious and hostile gaze, like poison needles.”

“Ah? Really? But... I thought no one looks at the denizens of Forest's Edge with such eyes anymore?”

“That isn't so. It wasn't the gaze from the usual group. It's from people I had never seen before.”

Was she implying someone was spying on us from the dark?

I hoped Ai Fa was mistaken, but from her serious expression, I wasn't too optimistic about that.

"However, would the people from the city only spy on us now...?"

Before I could finish, I heard Lala Wu wailing: "Hyaa!"

"What's the matter, Lala Wu!?"

I hurried back to the stall.

A tall figure stood in front of it.

However, Tara was standing right beside this person, and Ludo Wu didn't adjust his position either. Lala Wu herself was just standing there with her hands on her hips, and there wasn't any sense of danger at all.

"Ah, what a waste! Let me say this first, it's you whose hand slipped. I won't refund you the money, you know?"

What exactly happened?

I went over together with Ai Fa who was following me closely.

"Uwah, what happened here?"

I quickly found out the reason for her wail. A portion of [Myam-roasted meat] was scattered on the griddle.

The grilled poitan broke apart, scattering the meat and aria inside. To avoid them getting burnt, Lala Wu scraped them to a corner of the griddle with a spatula as she looked at us angrily.

"As you can see, this customer spilled the food! What a waste, I can't even!"

My gaze rested on that customer.

His 1.8 m tall body was covered by a hooded cloak. His jawline that wasn't hidden by

the hood showed his dark skin. It was a customer from the east.

I thought for a moment that he was Shumimaru, but that wasn't so. That man removed his hood and lowered his head apologetically. His hair, tied in a ponytail behind him, was brown, not silver in color.

"Sorry. I spilled it accidentally. You not wrong, I am."

He spoke more fluently than Shumimaru.

Most easterners looked the same to me. He had a long face, narrow eyes, lips, and a high nose bridge, making the typical facial profile of a Semu. He had a tall and slender build and seemed very thin. But his light-colored hair and brown eyes were rare among the Semu.

And it was even rarer seeing the food being spilled onto the griddle.

This easterner customer squinted his eyes with a hint of sadness and uncovered the right side of his body. His thin but muscular right arm was wrapped in bloodied bandages.

"My right arm is hurt, so I wanted to take it with my left hand. Left hand a little clumsy, so spilled. Dirtied the griddle, apologies."

He was still a little stiff, but he spoke western much better than Shumimaru.

And it was probably due to his uncommon hair color, but I felt a different air about him compared to Shumimaru.

Anyway, I felt a sense of goodwill towards this customer.

"Please don't mind that. Can you wait for a moment?"

As the food didn't fall onto the ground, I couldn't just waste this [Myam-roasted meat].

But the crucial part of the dish, the poitan wrap was covered in oil and sauce from the griddle, and it would be difficult to revert it to its original form. By the way, one of the ingredients, the shredded tino was scattered all over.

Alright then, let's mash it up.

I removed the filling from the poitan as best as I could and moved the poitan to the chopping board. I then diced them with a knife and shifted them to a sampling plate.

I moved the rest of the ingredients to the center of the griddle, added half a spoonful of myam and fruit wine sauce, and then mixed it. Once the cabbage-like tino softened, it was done.

After shifting these to the plate, I mixed the filling together with the diced grilled poitan.

"How does this look? It might not look pretty, but the taste should be about the same."

It looked like a stir-fried dish from Chinese cuisines. It was acceptable to me, but how would he find it?

That customer smiled happily. I was shocked to see a Semu smile, since they thought that showing emotions was disgraceful.

"Thank you. No waste copper plates, I'm very thankful."

The easterner clumsily held the plate with his right hand and used the spoon I gave him to eat the [Myam-roasted meat] bowl.

The smile on his face brightened.

"Very delicious. Kiba, very delicious."

"T-Thank you for your compliment."

By the way, as Semu people didn't speak western well, this was the first time I talked so much with an easterner other than Shumimaru.

"My right arm, injured. Can't work, for now. So copper plates, precious. I'm very grateful."

After he quickly finished the [Myam-roasted meat] bowl blissfully, he said to me.

"I'm Sangjura. Can tell me, your name?"

“Yes, I’m Asuta of the Fa house.”

“Asuta of the Fa house. I will be in Genos every day, until I recover. Every day, I come buy from your stall.”

“Thank you very much, I’m happy to hear that.”

“I feel the same. I’m happy to know such a tasty dish.”

Ludo Wu stood beside Lala Wu, while Ai Fa was beside me, and both stared intensely at this smiling customer— the easterner Sangjura.

“Hmm, you seem really capable. How did you injure your hand?”

Ludo Wu couldn’t suppress his curiosity and asked.

Sangjura shook his head in surprise.

“I rode a Totos to travel. Totos, suddenly fell on a rocky path. I fell off the Totos, and my hand hit a sharp rock.”

“Oh, I see. That explains why such a deft person like you got injured.”



Sangjura blinked in greater surprise.

"I'm just a wanderer, not a swordsman."

"Hmm? But you seem to be very strong."

"...In journey, danger is expected. Bandits, beasts, dangerous. I have learned how to protect myself."

Sangjura said as he smiled bashfully.

And then handed me the empty plate.

"Many thanks for today. I'm grateful to art father Selva of the west."

"Huh? Sangjura, aren't you an easterner?"

"No. My mother, easterner. But I grew up in the western kingdom. I, westerner."

So Sangjura is a mixed blood of the east and west, huh.

But that brought another question, why was he speaking western so stiffly? But I couldn't bring myself to ask that. In this world, being of mixed blood meant a complicated background.

"Well then, I will be back, tomorrow."

With that, Sangjura put on his hood and headed south.

What a pleasant moment, I felt satisfied with myself.

However, I heard two voices discuss with intense bloodlust:

"Hmm, to think someone so skilled is in this town... Ai Fa, do you think you can take this guy?"

"If the terms are the same for both sides, I can. But I probably can't afford to make any mistakes."

The two of them were Ai Fa and Ludo Wu, of course.

When he heard Ai Fa's icy response, Ludo Wu clicked his tongue with a: "Tch!".

"Ai Fa, you are that confident of winning? I-I'm not sure... I feel like I might lose..."

"That's not for sure, you are on the same level as that man."

"If you put it that way, that means Ai Fa is stronger than me!"

"You don't think so?"

The killing intent intensified.

As they were getting heated up, I dowsed cold water on the argument: "Wait, wait."

"He is just a normal customer, can you not think about things so strangely? He might be capable, but isn't he warm and gentle?"

"Well, we only spoke for a while, so who knows if he is friend or foe. You are the one who is too trusting."

"Ai Fa is right. If the town is full of such people, two guards won't be enough."

After saying that, Ludo Wu ruffled his blonde hair.

"Anyway, we can tell whether there are more of such people after walking around town. That Kamyua Yost and the noble with grey eyes can't be trifled with either."

Speaking of which, Ai Fa and Ludo Wu both got into the elite eight of the Wu clan test of might competition. I didn't know how well they would fare in actual combat, but since both of them regarded him that highly, Sangjura must be exceptionally skilled.

But anyway... I don't think he will cause any trouble.

While I was thinking about all that, Tara who was left alone said loudly: "Tara needs to go home soon!"

"I want to order one [Myam-roasted meat] and three [Kiba burgers] !"

"You are eating four portions? That's incredible."

“No! This is for the clothes shop owner and the pot dealer uncle!”

Tara said indignantly, and Ludo Wu laughed out loud.

The atmosphere finally brightened, and Ai Fa returned to the rear with a shrug. The moment she left, a customer came. They were Dell with uneven-colored brown hair and her escort Lavis.

When she saw them, Ai Fa stopped in her track.

“W-Welcome. Do you want to eat the dish from this stall today?”

“Yes! I have decided to alternate every day, so I will eat here today!”

Dell was all smiles. I could feel that Ai Fa was looking at her over my shoulder.

Actually, after Shumimaru left last night, I told Ai Fa about this girl. I thought I should tell Ai Fa that this girl was part of the merchant group invited by Pyschkurewuss to stay in his mansion, and since Ai Fa will be visiting the Post Station Town as a guard, they might run into each other. So I decided to explain everything before any misunderstanding arose.

I wondered if my judgment was sound and felt incredibly tense.

“Hmm... There seem to be more people today?”

Dell surveyed my stall suspiciously.

When her beautiful green eyes caught sight of Ai Fa, a fire of defiance started burning in them.

“That’s fine and all, but, that person over there, why are you staring at me? What did I do to you?”

“...You didn’t do anything to me, but you laid your hands on my family, girl from the south.”

Ai Fa said quietly and walked to my side.

This development made me break out in cold sweat.

“Or did Asuta make a move on you first? It’s rare seeing a young southerner girl in the Post Station Town though.”

“What? Are you talking about me hitting Asuta? What has that got to do with you?”

“It concerns me because Asuta is my family.”

I glanced at Ai Fa from the corner of my eye, and she didn’t look angry. She was just very unhappy, with a cold light shining in her eyes.

“I must admit that Asuta is at fault too, but I don’t think violence that will leave a mark is right. I hope you can be more careful in the future.”

“Family... What do you mean by family!? Are you two husband and wife!?”

“N-No, we are not married. We are just a family living under one roof. We are not blood-related, but she is an important family member.”

When she heard my answer, Dell looked even more agitated:

“If you are not married, what sort of family are you? Is Asuta owned by this woman? Isn’t slavery illegal in the western kingdom, aside from the north?”

“I-I’m neither a slave nor a pet. Erm, how do I explain this...”

“No need to explain. Anyway, girl of the south, if you don’t want others to speak badly of you behind your back, be more prudent with your actions and obey the law.”

“You are really annoying. I don’t want to hear you talk about Asuta this or Asuta that! I already apologized to Asuta, and he forgave me! Why are you still telling me all that!?”

“That’s why I’m just asking you to be careful in the future and not pursue this further. Why won’t you listen?”

It was becoming a chaotic battle.

This was also the first time Ai Fa argued with someone in town. I needed to step up and smooth things over... But, what should I do?

“Hey, calm down a little! Erm... Dell, I did something rude to you, and even though both

of us had resolved things, your family would still complain a little, right? That's how Ai Fa feels, and I hope you can understand."

"Ah— but..."

"And Ai Fa, I'm happy that you are worried about me. But didn't I tell you that I already resolved this amicably? We have both apologized and reflected on it. It's fine now."

"But..."

Both of them shut up with dissatisfied faces.

But peace didn't even last five seconds.

"I was wrong for hitting you, but Asuta was at fault for saying rude things first! Asuta, what gives you the right to admonish me!?"

"That's right, this problem was caused by you in the first place. You are the one who needs to reflect the most."

Ai Fa then leaned in close and continued: "And... how does that girl look like a boy? Aside from dressing like a boy, she seems completely like a girl."

She then kicked me plenty of times behind the stall.

"I was wondering how manly that girl looked since you mistook her for a man... Asuta, are those eyeballs just decorations on your face?"

"That's too much, you are going too far."

I rebuked softly, and Ai Fa turned her head exaggeratedly with a grunt.

When I realized it, Lala Wu was watching this scene with a smile just like Kamyua Yost.

"Y-You want one portion? Please wait a moment, I will prepare it for you right away!"

I pulled myself together and started making the [Myam-roasted meat] .

While all this was happening, Ludo Wu observed Lavis who was standing behind Dell, and Lavis was watching Ludo Wu too.

The young man was probably wary of Ludo Wu and Ai Fa who were in hunter's garbs and armed with machete and saber. He didn't seem too tense about Ludo Wu and was merely returning an unfriendly gaze.

"Oh, Asuta, you are still at the stall!"

The architect's group swamped in.

Arudas who was at the fore of the group laughed heartily.

"Welcome! Have you been busy lately?"

"Yes, this job needs to be finished by tomorrow. We will make a loss if we drag on for another day, so we can't slack off."

Arudas then drooped his bushy brows.

"Sigh, I want to stay in Genos forever to eat Asuta's cooking. But after thinking about the cost of the inn and Totos stable, I can't do that... Ah, what a pity! Unless there is some urgent job, I will only visit Genos once a year."

"How many times are you going to say that? Your wife and kids are waiting for you back home."

The grumpy Pops jabbed Arudas' stomach.

He then turned towards me.

"Asuta... how much jerky do you have left?"

"Huh? Jerky? I only have this much left today."

I have been preparing 2 kg of jerky every day.

After seeing the amount in the sack, Pops grumbled: "That's not enough."

"This isn't enough. I want ten times this amount by tomorrow."

"T-Ten times? What for do you want so much jerky?"

“Why else but eating them on the way home, of course? There are eight of us and the journey back takes half a month, so we need ten times more.”

Pops stared at me.

“Can it be prepared then? If not, I will just have to buy Karon jerky.”

“I-I think I can prepare them. But I can’t be sure unless I go back to Forest’s Edge and check.”

I already told the houses nearby that a big job might come in, and the Wu clan and Lutim house should have that much leftover fresh meat. With the mobility of Gilulu, transporting 20 kg of jerky from the village wasn’t too difficult.

“But Pops, I thought you don’t like the taste of kiba jerky? The taste of salt and spice in the kiba jerky is strong, so is the taste of kiba...”

“I know all that. Business like this doesn’t come often, aren’t you going to accept?”

Pops answered irately and scratched his messy hair.

“...After eating so much every day, I have gotten used to the kiba flavor. Since the price is the same as Karon jerky, I think kiba is fine too.”

“Ah, if I can’t eat Asuta’s dishes, chewing on kiba jerky can soothe my soul.”

“You are the only one thinking such retarded things!”

After lashing out at the picky eater Arudas, Pops scratched his head again.

“Anyway, prepare as much as you can. I will top up the balance with Karon meat. So... I might only drop by in the afternoon tomorrow, so tell the girls tending the stall in advance, alright?”

“Yes, so will you be coming at noon tomorrow?”

This might be the moment that we would part.

I took off the towel on my head and bowed towards the architect group.

“E-Erm, thank you for taking care of me all this time...”

“Don’t do that! We are not parting forever!”

Pops suddenly yelled and slammed two red copper plates on the counter.

“We will visit Genos once every year! Are you going to bid farewell so annoyingly every time? And there are dozens to hundreds of southerners going in and out of Genos every day.”

“Yes, but my regular patrons are a great source of support for me. I’m really... grateful to everyone.”

Pops looked like he wanted to say something, but he turned his head away without a word.

His companions behind him all laughed cheerfully.

“We will still visit after the Blue month! We will eat your share too, Pops, so don’t worry!”

“Annoying! You want me to send you flying with a kick!?”

“If you keep dallying, we can’t finish our work by tomorrow! Finish your food already!”

Some of them were hired locally too. Speaking of which, Pops said he was going back home with 8 other people, but this group had more than ten people.

Are these people mixed blood or permanent residents of Genos? Or freelancers staying in Genos?

There was no way to find out.

However, all of them were my important patrons.

“Hmmp, are you going back to Nerva?”

Dell who had shifted to the side asked curiously.

Pops who was quiet from annoyance scowled and looked back at her.

“Oh, it’s the girl from Zealand. What, you are actually eating kiba?”

“Yes, I tried it once and it was delicious! It was so embarrassing of me to complain about it being stinky and tough.”

“Hmmp, I made a bigger fool of myself in the past.”

Pops then glared at me.

His face looked displeased, but there was a gentle light in his green eyes.

“Asuta, we will be back tomorrow. I heard things are a little rough right now, but if you shut down your stall before we come back, we will go right into Forest’s Edge to settle things with you.”

“Okay. I will be happy if you taste my cooking next year too.”

I was tearing up before I knew it.

One year later... Would I still be able to see them again?

I wasn’t god and didn’t know, so I could only do the best on my part.

By now, the sun was high above my head, and the meeting between the noble of the city and the Forest’s Edge tribal chiefs would be starting somewhere in Genos soon.

Part 2

Kaslan Lutim reported that the conference ended smoothly for today.

There were 6 participants from Forest's Edge, namely the three tribal chiefs Donda Wu, Dali Sauti, and Graff Zaza, as well as Kaslan Lutim, the head of the Fou house, and the head of the Beim house. Basically, the followers of the tribal chiefs were replaced by the representatives of the minor houses.

Our side informed that there would be six attendees, and the people of the city only seemed interested in the tribal chiefs, hence we decided on this lineup.

The venue was the same as last time, Pyschkurewuss' mansion.

However, it wasn't located in the city. It was a vast orchard and mansion surrounded by rock walls to the north of the city. I didn't know this place existed since I did my business in the south of the city, or that it was the territory under Pyschkurewuss—the territory of the Count of Turan.

And the grand Pyschkurewuss mansion was built in a corner of this territory. It seemed that Pyschkurewuss disliked inviting the denizens of Forest's Edge into the city, so this mansion was used as the meeting venue when the Tsun clan was still the tribal chief clan.

It was a grand and extravagant building erected from stone instead of timber.

The tribal chiefs of Forest's Edge waited in the hall of this building ahead of the agreed time for Pyschkurewuss' group to arrive.

The agreed time was noon.

Kamyua Yost and Malfreed reached just before noon.

The exterior of the mansion was probably guarded by soldiers, but only three of them came into the hall.

Kamyua Yost was the same as usual, and Malfreed was dressed in his white armor too. Unlike the denizens of Forest's Edge whose blades were temporarily confiscated at the entrance, the two of them came in with their swords.

And so, time passed by slowly, and the toll of the bell announcing the arrival of noon could be heard faintly... At this moment, Pyschkurewuss came into the hall under the escort of twenty guards. Kaslan Lutim then recounted slowly.



“Fufu... Sorry for the wait, everyone...”

Pyschkurewuss said as he sat in a large leather-clad chair.

We stood in the middle of the room. Pyschkurewuss’ guards held spears that were about their height, and half of them lined up against the wall to the left, right and rear.

The other half surrounded Pyschkurewuss, who turned his gaze towards Malfreed.

“Lord Malfreed, what a surprise... What good will it do for you to attend this conference...”

He showed his clear displeasure towards Malfreed’s attendance.

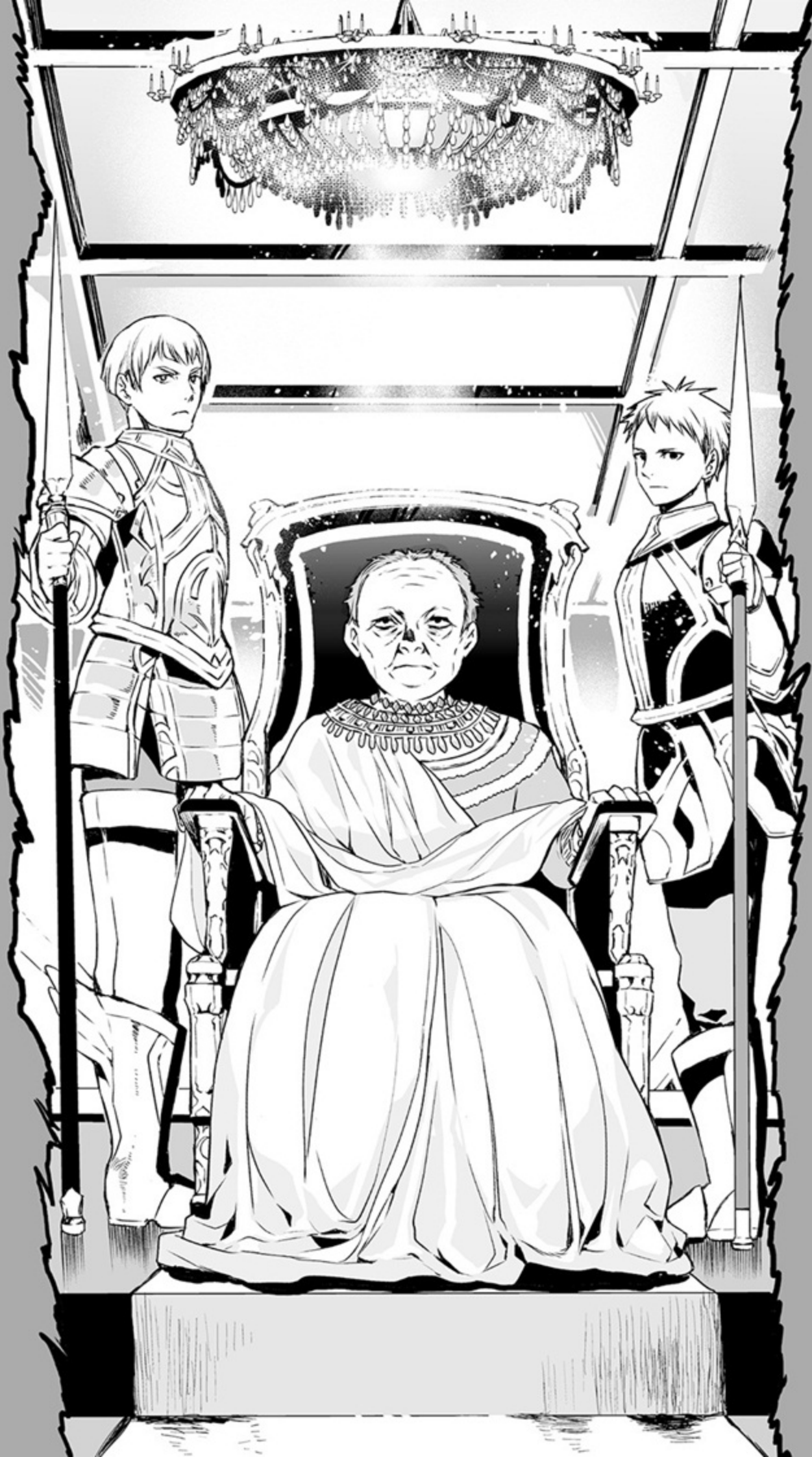
“I will rule Genos one day after all and don’t think keeping the peace in Genos is a trivial matter, Count Pyschkurewuss Turan.”

Malfreed answered.

It wasn’t my first time meeting him, but he was an incredible person.

He took off his helmet in the hall, and I finally got to see his face. He seemed older than me, had light brown hair and proportionate facial features, and looked just like a noble.

But his grey eyes... were as cold and clear as the moonlight, just like Asuta described.



I think he was quite formidable as a swordsman.

But I wasn't as keen as Ludo Wu and Ai Fa in gauging this so I couldn't be certain. I just felt that he couldn't be trifled with.

Leaving that aside for now, Pyschkurewuss smiled coldly at Malfreed's response.

Pyschkurewuss was always smiling.

He was probably concealing his emotions by smiling.

"By surprise, I mean the eldest son of Marquis Genos Marstein disguising himself as a plebeian with a dirty piece of cloth... Lord Malfreed, aren't your actions overstepping your authority as the captain of the castle guards...?"

"You might not like my way of doing things, but rest assured that I won't neglect my work. It is my freedom to do what I wish during my free time, Count Pyschkurewuss Turan. That aside... Holding a talk with the tribal chiefs of Forest's Edge is your duty. How about completing your own duties first?"

Pyschkurewuss' smile twisted even further as he cast his gaze towards us.

What a creepy man.

No matter how many times I met him, my impression of him remained the same.

He was dressed as elegantly as a noble, with soft, thin, and white clothes covering his entire body. Only his neck and limbs were bare. His neck and wrists had plenty of metallic and stone accessories, and his attire glittered like that of a woman's gown.

Speaking of which, his stature was as thin and petite as a woman. Only his head looked big, which made his body look unbalanced. Instead of a woman, a child would be a more apt description.

His skin had a strange shade of dark blue and his eyes were bloodshot, resembling a face of a person at ill health.

Although Graff Zaza and the others called him an "old man", he wasn't that old. He was just skinny with an unhealthy skin color, making him look much older than he was.

However... On his lackluster and wrinkled face, his light-colored eyes were full of life.

Those eyes scared me.

More specifically, I felt strong disgust towards them.

I didn't know the reason.

The tribal chiefs said: "Those were eyes of contempt, just like Zuro Tsun's."

I thought so too. But I felt this wasn't the only reason.

An anxiety arose within me, as if I was facing a feral beast that I couldn't communicate with words... or something like that.

Anyway, we feared Pyschkurewuss not because of the forceful nature of his words, but because of his eyes.

"Then I shall do just that then and work on this troublesome task... Tribal chiefs of Forest's Edge, what punishment did you mete out to the Tsun clan who violated this serious crime...?"

"Our conclusion remains the same. We think that only Zuro Tsun who guided our tribe down the wrong path needs to be punished further."

Dali Sauti answered.

Donda Wu and Graff Zaza had already lost their cool from rage and disgust, so, on that day, the discussion was centered around me and Dali Sauti.

Pyschkurewuss smiled impatiently.

"I already gave you more time than agreed on, and you are still so stubborn... So there was no reason to let your tribe deliberate further in the first place..."

"That isn't true. We have considered it for many days and discussed countless times before coming here today with an even stronger conviction. If you feel our conclusion is wrong, then I hope you can guide us towards the proper path with your words."

Dali Sauti was very calm.

Pyschkurewuss was still smiling.

“My thinking remains the same as the last few days, punishment for the crime... The seriousness of the crime between the mastermind and those who are ordered is, of course, different so the law officer in Genos will decide on the sentencing...”

“You said the same thing a few days ago. But doesn’t the Forest’s Edge settlement have the right to judge and punish denizens who transgressed the law by themselves? The people in the city have no rights to complain about how we deal with the denizens of Forest’s Edge in the first place.”

“That’s because the rules in Forest’s Edge are more strict than the laws of Genos... If you followed your own rules and scalped their heads, we would see no need to interfere...”

Pyschkurewuss said in a ridiculous tone.

“It is a known fact that the denizens of Forest’s Edge can govern themselves, and you also have the authority to sentence your own people too... So we can’t accept that you are punishing your own people in a more lenient way than what the Genos law dictates...”

“But why? Isn’t the punishment meted out as a judgment of the seriousness of the crime? That’s why we have chosen to punish all members of the Tsun clan in accordance to their sins.”

“And the criminals escaped and committed new crimes because you didn’t execute them like you should have...?”

And of course, he was referring to Zattsu Tsun and Tay Tsun.

“Not punishing the criminals justly and failure to maintain public order in Genos... The incident I mentioned proved this point, correct...? If the denizens of Forest’s Edge don’t have the resolve to execute the criminals, then let us handle it before more harm is done...”

I decided to interject here.

Because I could sense intense rage from Graff Zaza’s face.

“Please allow me to share my opinion. You mentioned the resolve to execute the criminals, but is executing criminals indiscriminately the correct resolve...? After careful consideration of the Tsun Clan’s behavior, we have decided to sentence Zattsu Tsun and Zuro Tsun to death, and guide the others back on the proper path.”

“Fufu... Isn’t it the unspoken law amongst the denizens of Forest’s Edge that the rules of Forest’s Edge are absolute...? I am skeptical about the weak attitude of twisting the rules to forgive the criminals, which is different from the style of the Forest’s Edge...”

“The rules need to be respected. But if someone was force-fed the grace of the forest, do you think they should be scalped? We don’t.”

Pyschkurewuss’ mouth twisted in a smile, and he looked at each of us one at a time.

“I have wondered about this since the conference a few days ago; you sure have a way with words for a young Forest’s Edge hunter... Why don’t we elect a talent like you to be the tribal chief and lead the denizens of Forest’s Edge to a bright future...?”

Pyschkurewuss often said things to taunt the tribal chiefs.

Before Graff Zaza burst out in anger, I answered:

“You are mistaken, I’m just speaking on behalf of the tribal chiefs. Just like you representing the Lord of Genos, Marstein.”

Pyschkurewuss was momentarily silent.

But a vicious smile returned to his face.

“It is our fault that Zattsu Tsun and Tay Tsun escaped, which put the townsfolk in the Post Station Town in danger. It is as you say, if we executed Zuro Tsun and Zattsu Tsun on the spot, the disaster a few days ago would have been avoided.”

If we kept lingering on the same subject, the problem wouldn’t be solved. I decided to answer him.

“But thanks to that, we have learned a lot of new facts too. Pyschkurewuss, what are your thoughts about that?”

“...What are you referring to...?”

“I refer to Zattsu Tsun and Tay Tsun assaulting the fake caravan group and confessing that they committed the same devious thing ten years before.”

Pyschkurewuss raised the corner of his mouth in a smile.

It was a displeasing smile.

“This is ridiculous... At best, this is a nonsensical rambling of a dying villain... We can’t believe such nonsense...”

“Yes, there is no longer any evidence of the crimes in the past. But there is no doubt that they attacked the fake caravan and that the same thing happened a decade ago. And... there have always been rumors that the culprit is a denizen of Forest’s Edge, correct?”

“Rumors are just rumors... They are not facts...”

“Is that true? I heard that an evidence that proved the murderer is a denizen of Forest’s Edge was found ten years ago.”

Pyschkurewuss was quiet for a moment.

The leader of the caravan died with a hunter’s necklace from the Forest’s Edge in his hands. I had never imagined that I will learn this truth.

Kamyua Yost and Malfreed who told us that stayed silent.

“And we also heard about the denizens of Forest’s Edge not being brought to task after committing countless crimes. Are these all baseless rumors?”

“Nothing more than rumors... To be swayed by such rumors, and you call yourselves denizens of Forest’s Edge...?”

Pyschkurewuss caught his breath and then started speaking:

“I don’t know what you mean by countless crimes, but I do know about the caravan being attacked ten years ago... However, the young hunter from Forest’s Edge, the culprit for that incident has already been executed...”

“I see, so that’s how it is.”

I already heard about this from Kamyua Yost, so wasn't surprised at all.

Pyschkurewuss looked at me with a sharp gaze.

"The culprit for that incident was the 'Red Beard Gang' whose base of operation is around Genos... Those bandits have all been apprehended and brought to justice... Young hunter from Forest's Edge, there is no reason to doubt this fact..."

"A bandit gang, huh. Then how do you explain the hunter's necklace in the merchant's hand?"

"How would I know such details... But the horns and tusks of kiba can be bought in the western kingdom. Doesn't your tribe sell them in exchange for money...?"

Although kiba tusks and horns weren't sold in Genos, they were peddled off to various cities as a type of materials.

After buying or stealing these tusks and horns anyone could make a hunter's necklace.

"That caravan was planning to go through the Morga Forest and head to the eastern city... Did the 'Red Beard Gang' want to make the denizens of Forest's Edge their scapegoats...? What a shallow scheme, and those who got fooled by this should be ashamed..."

"Yes, but it's not an easy feat to convince the people in the Post Station Town though?"

Kamyua Yost spoke for the first time.

Pyschkurewuss glared at him with murky eyes.

"Speaking of the 'Red Beard Gang', I heard they were against murder and just robbed from the rich and gave to the poor. They were thieves of justice and very reputable. A decade ago, when I was a new guardian, their exploits had already spread to the neighboring towns. No one would have believed back then that the 'Red Beard Gang' wiped the entire caravan out and pushed the blame to other people."

"...Calling them thieves of justice is a lie... They are just a bunch of outlaws..."

"That is true for the targeted nobles, but not the peasants. Thinking back, when the 'Red Beard Gang' that was revered as heroes got executed in place of the denizens of

Forest's Edge, that fueled the animosity of the people towards the denizens of Forest's Edge."

Kamyua Yost smiled retardedly as usual.

Pyschkurewuss was also smiling, but his bloodshot eyes were dripping with hate.

"Aren't you Malfreed's follower...? Since you are just his follower, know your place..."

"I'm speaking on behalf of my silent friend right now. If anything I said went against Malfreed's thoughts, he would have stopped me, so don't worry."

Pyschkurewuss shifted his gaze onto Malfreed.

Malfreed remained silent.

"Continuing with the topic earlier, as the young hunter from Forest's Edge Kaslan Lutim mentioned, there are rumors in the Post Station Town of the various crimes committed by the denizens of Forest's Edge... such as abducting women, stealing crops, and assaulting travelers. The strange thing is, all these were pushed to the 'Red Beard Gang', and they were executed for them. Whenever a member of the 'Red Beard Gang' got executed, there were rumors of the denizens of Forest's Edge committing these crimes. Even though the rumors coming before the execution would make more sense."

"..."

"These incidents stopped in these ten years. It remains unclear whether the reason is the execution of the leader of the 'Red Beard Gang', or because Zattsu Tsun, the former head of the Tsun clan, fell ill."

At this moment, Pyschkurewuss' face changed drastically.

He was still smiling... but somehow, it felt like the smile of a munto that fed on carrion.

Although I have never seen a munto smile before.

"So... What are you trying to say, swordsman who resembles a northerner...?"

"It is as you say, I have the blood of a northerner. But the god I worship is the western

god. Anyway... Leaving those trivial details aside, the denizens of Forest's Edge are being accused of not getting punished no matter what crimes they commit. And they got away scot-free by sacrificing the lives of others... The 'Red Beard Gang' has faded into obscurity after ten years, and only these rumors remain. Until a few days ago, when Zattsu Tsun and Tay Tsun confessed to their crimes."

"..."

"It was unnatural for the 'Red Beard Gang' to set an ambush in the middle of the Morga Forest in the first place, with all the kiba roaming around. If I were them, I would have attacked them when they left the forest, just before entering the city. This way, there would be less risk of kiba attack, and I could push the crime to the denizens of Forest's Edge. It's more natural to think that the culprit behind the attack ten years ago was Zattsu Tsun's gang, isn't that so?"

"There's no point in debating this... Whether the criminal is the former head of the Tsun clan or the 'Red Beard Gang' bandits, all of them have been brought to justice... No matter how hard we try now, we won't be able to find any evidence..."

Pyschkurewuss wetted his disgustingly discolored lips and answered unwaveringly.

"But, is there really a need for evidence...? There is no doubt that they were the culprits... The 'Red Beard Gang' were bandits that targeted the nobility and the wealthy, while the former Tsun clan head trampled on the grace of the Morga forest and even committed arson... All the criminals have paid for their crimes with their lives... and the issues have been appropriately resolved..."

Kamyua Yost snickered and then asked: "Appropriately resolved, huh. What about the devious crimes that happened after the caravan was assaulted ten years ago?"

He resembled some kind of animal when he smiled.

"These might be old news, but you didn't forget them, did you? The envoy from the Banam city, which was closely related to Genos, got wiped out, and the former captain of the town guards was murdered. Can you say for certain that the 'Red Beard Gang' was behind both these incidents?"

"..."

"Speaking of which, there were rumors in town that the denizens of Forest's Edge

were behind this.”

“ ... ”

“All this doesn’t add up. If the ‘Red Beard Gang’ did this, why did they break their principle of not committing murder? If Zattsu Tsun did this, why go after the captain of the town guards? Maybe attacking the envoy makes sense... But the captain of the town guards won’t walk around town with gold and other accessories on him.”

“That means the ‘Red Beard Gang’ is behind this... It is the duty of the town guards to subjugate the bandits, so it is no surprise if they hold a grudge against the captain...”

“No, no, pinning all this on the ‘Red Beard Gang’ was done after the new captain took the post. There’s no need to say too much... He is the younger brother of Lord Pyschkurewuss, captain Shileru.”

“ ... ”

“Thanks to the work of the new captain Shileru, the ‘Red Beard Gang’ was subjugated. Zattsu Tsun and the others got away scot-free after all this got pinned to the ‘Red Beard Gang’, and the seed of suspicion towards the denizens of Forest’s Edge was planted deep into the heart of the townsfolk.”

“I never heard of something so outrageous before...”

“You might not have heard of this in the city. But this is the reality in the Post Station Town. After the ‘Red Beard Gang’ faded into obscurity, the townsfolk started to fear and ostracize the denizens of Forest’s Edge.”

Kamyua Yost said with a shrug.

“Like I said, thanks to Zattsu Tsun confessing to his crime from ten years ago, a wind of change is brewing... But this is really strange. The ‘Red Beard Gang’ was accused of pinning the crime on the denizens of Forest’s Edge, when in fact the ‘Red Beard Gang’ became a scapegoat for a crime perpetrated by a denizen of Forest’s Edge... The crime committed by Zattsu Tsun. What made captain Shileru so sure that all this was the doing of the ‘Red Beard Gang’? Were there any red beards left behind at the crime scene?”

“You can ask Shileru about that...”

“Malfreed already did. But he lacked enough evidence to convince my friend.”

Everyone turned quiet momentarily.

With a cold smile on his lips, Pyschkurewuss said slowly:

“I don’t know about that... Even so, all the criminals have been executed... Whether those crimes were committed by the Tsun clan former head or the bandits, what has that got to do with us...?”

“Yes, that’s the issue here. If all the criminals have been brought to justice, there is no point in bringing up old news. However, we can’t sit by idly if the mastermind behind all this is still scot-free.”

Kamyua Yost’s smile remained unchanged.

Malfreed was still expressionless.

“Zattsu Tsun was a denizen of Forest’s Edge and had almost no knowledge of the outside world. So it was strange for him to attack the Banam envoy and the town guards outside Genos.”

“That’s why this is the doing of the bandits...”

“Instead of the ‘Red Beard Gang’ breaking their principle of not murdering people out of the blue, wouldn’t it be more natural to assume that Zattsu Tsun had help from the outside?”

Kamyua Yost subtly cut off Pyschkurewuss’ words.

“By the way, external help is a must if they want to launder the goods they robbed from the caravan and envoy. Someone coerced Zattsu Tsun to attack... And that someone might also have the hidden agenda of wiping out the Banam envoy. Didn’t some of the people in the city think that continuing business with Banam would be bad for their trade?”

“...”

“And if this is pinned on the ‘Red Beard Gang’, you can also get rid of the bandits who were an eyesore to the aristocrats.”

“You are delusional, this is all nonsense...”

“Is that so? My friend had not interrupted me once. Anyway... We disguised ourselves as a caravan based on this deduction. We still didn’t uncover the real mastermind, but we managed to prove that Zattsu Tsun was behind the incident ten years ago.”

Malfreed stood beside the grinning Kamyua Yost and stared quietly at Pyschkurewuss.

Silence engulfed the hall once again.

There was a sense of danger in this silence.

Finally, Pyschkurewuss said in a strangely hoarse voice: “It’s as if...”

“It’s as if you are accusing me of being the mastermind behind all this...”

Kamyua Yost didn’t answer.

Pyschkurewuss was like munto hiding in the dark, with a dim glow in his eyes.

“High-quality mamaria and fuwano are grown in Banam... If we continue trading with them, at the very least, the orchard in my Turan territory will suffer a lot...”

“...”

“And the captain of the town guards is my brother Shileru, and I also continue to be the liaison with the Forest’s Edge... You are implying that if there is a mastermind behind these series of events, no one is more suspicious than me, correct...?”

Malfreed answered coldly: “There is no doubt that you are the biggest suspect.”

Pyschkurewuss slowly moved his sights onto him.

“What a surprise... Lord Malfreed, are you seriously slandering me...? Slandering me, the head of the Count Turan house...?”

“This is no slander. I’m merely stating the fact you are a suspect. I can’t pass judgment without any evidence.”

Malfreed used his grey eyes devoid of any human emotions to intimidate

Pyschkurewuss.

This felt like a standoff between a Madarama snake and a munto.

“And of course, if there is evidence, a criminal is a criminal. It doesn’t matter whether they are a noble or a commoner. I will wield the blade of justice in accordance with the law of Genos.”

“If there is evidence... Splendid... Wonderful words from the captain of the castle guards, the ones who uphold the law...”

Pyschkurewuss seemed relieved.

He was like a munto retreating into the depths of the woods after seeing the Madarama snake had already eaten its full.

Malfreed and Kamyua Yost’s questioning ended for the day.

What followed was the negotiation between us, the denizens of Forest’s Edge, and Pyschkurewuss. Dali Sauti and I looked at each other, unsure who should speak first.

But Donda Wu acted before we did, moving his body a little as if he was wiping the dangerous air out of the hall, and said:

“...Is this your so-called law, representative of the Genos landlord?”

Donda Wu’s voice was very calm.

Pyschkurewuss slowly turned his head towards him.

“I don’t really understand complicated matters, but I can’t find a shred of logic from your words, representative of the Genos’ landlord.”

“What a shocking statement... Wavering because of baseless ramblings is a sign of foolishness, tribal chief of the Forest’s Edge...”

“Then can you prove that incident a decade ago was the doing of the bandits? The hunter’s necklace found at the crime scene, Zattsu Tsun and Tay Tsun confessing their crimes. With all that in mind, what is your reason for thinking that this was the doing of the ‘Red Beard Gang’?”

“...The one who judged them to be the culprits wasn't me, but the captain of the town guards...”

“Isn't that captain your younger brother? Then please call him here.”

The hall turned rowdy.

The spear bearing guards slowly lost their calm.

Probably because of Donda Wu's aura.

Donda Wu sounded very calm, but a smile appeared on his face.

The smile he has when facing an enemy.

We weren't moving at all, but the guards seemed ready to thrust their spears at a moment's notice.

“Zattsu Tsun is suspected of committing grave crimes in the Forest's Edge too. My Wu clan's relationship with them was already very tense twenty years ago. But they didn't commit their felonies openly, so we could only bear with them for the past two decades.”

Pyschkurewuss' face didn't change at all.

His body was as small as a child and weak as if he was ill. But this man had the guts to withstand Donda Wu's aura.

Maybe he had met with Zattsu Tsun many times before Zattsu Tsun fell ill, and got used to the intimidating air of a Forest's Edge hunter.

But droplets of sweat seemed to be appearing on his bluish-black smiling face.

“That is trivial compared to the recent incidents in town. I already said that those bastards from the Tsun clan are free to draw their blades and damage stalls in the Post Station Town without any repercussion. Even if they get brought in for questioning, someone from the city would settle the problem with money... Can you tell me the reason why the denizens of Forest's Edge aren't being judged as criminals?”

“This has nothing to do with me... Maintaining the peace in the Post Station Town isn't under my purview, but the responsibility of the town guards...”



“That’s why you should get your younger brother to come over... No...”

Donda Wu’s grin grew even wider.

“Let’s call the Genos landlord over then. Or should we head over to the city to invite him?”

Pyschkurewuss put his arm on the armrest and leaned his body to the right.

I could feel that his mind was churning.

“Tribal chief of the Forest’s Edge... Marquis Marstein Genos has already entrusted the negotiations with the denizens of Forest’s Edge to me... Aren’t you being too arrogant, if you are asking me to invite Marquis Genos...?”

“We offered our blades to the landlord of Genos, not you. If we can’t resolve this with you, we can only escalate the matter up to the landlord.”

Donda Wu said in a booming voice.

His smile was gradually becoming that of a hunter.

“We didn’t have any proof, that’s why the Tsun clan was allowed to act out of line and trouble others. Not just the denizens of Forest’s Edge, they troubled the people in the Post Station Town too. We... don’t want to make the same mistake.”

“Which means... you don’t trust me, huh...”

Fufu... Pyschkurewuss showed a devious smile.

“In that case, tribal chiefs of the Forest’s Edge, I don’t trust you very much, so please let someone else be your representative... If I said that, would you understand what I’m thinking...?”

“What...?”

Donda Wu glared furiously.

The guards readied their spears, but Pyschkurewuss stopped them.

“I won’t say something so hostile... but I don’t really trust you that much... Heads of the Wu clan, Zaza house, and Sauti clan, whether you are qualified to be tribal chiefs... I have my doubts about that...”

Donda Wu restrained the enraged Graff Zaza as he asked: “What do you mean?”

“Tribal chiefs, I’m suspecting you... You didn’t execute the members of the Tsun clan who committed grave sins, and even let Zattsu Tsun got away... If you also allow Zuro Tsun to escape, no blood will be spilled... I’m suspecting whether this is all a scam...”

“Impossible! Are you saying we let Zattsu Tsun and Tay Tsun escape on purpose!?”

Graff Zaza finally roared.

Pyschkurewuss smiled cockily.

“I don’t want to suspect you either... But your actions are soft, unlike the denizens of Forest’s Edge. You forgave the criminals and let Zattsu Tsun who was to be executed to escape. Completely unlike my impression of Forest’s Edge denizens... And you even got fooled by lies and slandered me...”

“Is this your answer, representative of the Genos Lord?”

Donda Wu raised an arm to stop Graff Zaza who wanted to yell again, and said calmly:

“We can’t trust each other... So the talks are at an impasse?”

Then I can only ask the Genos Lord for his true intention with my blade personally... I thought Donda Wu would say that and, honestly speaking, I was very anxious.

Pyschkurewuss probably thought the same way.

After a short silence, Pyschkurewuss said in a more serious tone:

“It’s still too early to come to a conclusion, tribal chiefs of the Forest’s Edge... We have only just met... I think we need more time to build a strong relationship of trust...”

“Fufu. Then what do you think we should do? Repeat the same questions, like scratching the scar that hasn’t fully healed yet?”

“We need time to think, but going over the same content is meaningless... So I will take a step back as a show of trust and goodwill...”

Pyschkurewuss said:

“I will trust your judgment on the branch house members who violated the taboo under the coercion of the former clan head, and not pursue their crimes further... But I want you to hand over the clan head and the six other main house members... This decision is a show of my trust...”

Part 3

“...The talks continued for a while longer, but there wasn’t anything worth mentioning.”

Kaslan Lutim finished his detailed report.

I did my preparation work as I listened and exhaled the sigh that I had been holding in.

“Thank you for your hard work. Kaslan Lutim, your memory and the way you recount the entire meeting is top-notch.”

“You flatter me. I have covered all the important points though.”

“Yes, that’s good enough. Just understanding the content takes a lot of effort.”

I was the one who asked him to tell me about the meeting, but I didn’t expect the briefing to be so detailed.

We weren’t in the Fa house, but the kitchen of the Wu clan main house.

Ai Fa stood behind me as she listened to the report, while Leina Wu and Shela Wu were studying how to make hamburg steak further inside. I have decided to teach them how to make [Kiba burger] from today onwards.

“I consulted Kamyua ahead of time, but this is the first time I heard of the ‘Red Beard Gang.’”

“Yes. I only know that they were a bunch of bandits. Since we are not directly involved, he thought there wasn’t any point in telling us about them.”

“But I have never heard that name from anyone in town, and it makes me intrigued even more.”

The thieves of justice being forgotten by the people after ten years wasn’t anything surprising.

But since Kamyua Yost kept mentioning them... Were they a crucial existence?

And this was the first time I heard about the Banam envoys and the captain of the town guards.

They were probably the “people sort of like a political enemy of Pyschkurewuss” that Kamyua Yost was talking about. But from their conversation, the envoy sounded closer to being business competitors instead of political enemies.

“Yes, it’s great that he conceded the point on the branch house members, but to think he would blame us for Zattsu Tsun’s escape.”

“Yes. We have no excuses about that, so Graff Zaza could only suppress his anger.”

The situation wasn’t optimistic at all.

Pyschkurewuss claimed to have lowered the terms as a sign of trust; we, on the other hand, had shown our hand from the very start, pointing the forthrightness of Forest’s Edge. This was the best way we came up with after careful deliberation.

He definitely didn’t care about the branch house in the first place. However...

I already knew that Pyschkurewuss would make an outrageous demand, a trademark of the negotiation style of the city people. He was just displaying his authority towards the new tribal chiefs.

However, things changed a lot over the past few days.

Pyschkurewuss who continuously had been turning a blind eye to the Tsun clan’s wrongdoings was now suspected of being the mastermind behind a series of incidents.

Could Pyschkurewuss be a vicious man, and Zattsu Tsun’s gang was just coerced by them? Just how would this incident end?

At the very least, he wants to seal Zuro Tsun’s lips.

Tay Tsun once claimed that he was the only one aside from Zattsu Tsun who knew about Zattsu Tsun’s delusion of grandeur. He also said that the weak Zuro Tsun couldn’t inherit this will.

Even without this confession, as the clan head, Zuro Tsun could very likely have gotten

hold of Zattsu Tsun's crimes. The possibility of him knowing the relationship between Zattsu Tsun and Pyschkurewuss wasn't zero. In short, he was an existence that Pyschkurewuss couldn't ignore.

However, he just needed to accept the Forest's Edge chiefs opinion and extradite Zuro Tsun into the city as a criminal. With Malfreed stepping in, Pyschkurewuss was probably feeling the heat, so there was no reason in dragging out the meeting.

But he was still insisting that we hand over all the members of the main house... Was he worried about his secret being leaked to them?

If that is true, this is no joking matter. How can we hand Yamiel Lei, Mida, and the others to this despicable man now?

After thinking about it this far, I finally finished cutting the meat.

I placed the Santoku knife onto the counter and then turned towards Kaslan Lutim and said:

"So, the next meeting is set in half a month's time?"

"Yes. We need to decide before the 15th of the White month."

Tomorrow was the 31st of the Blue month, so that would be half a month away.

He sure was taking his time.

"Why is he leaving such a large gap in between? Our tribal chiefs can consider this carefully, and Kamyua Yost can conduct more investigations. This is great for us, but what does Pyschkurewuss intend to gain by leaving so many days blank?"

"Don't know. But I don't think he is someone who will do something that doesn't benefit himself."

"Yes. Kaslan Lutim seems to really detest Pyschkurewuss, correct?"

Kaslan Lutim nodded seriously in response.

"I know I shouldn't mix in my personal feelings in this, but even without being enemies, I probably won't ever be friends with that man."

Pyschkurewuss was actually so detestable and made others so wary. I had not seen him in person yet, so my impression of him was very vague.

However, I could understand what Kamyua Yost meant that they couldn't bring Pyschkurewuss right now. No matter how suspicious he might be, there still wasn't any concrete evidence.

From the circumstantial evidence, we could infer that Pyschkurewuss and his brother who was the captain of the town guards might have colluded with Zattsu Tsun and planned the whole thing.

Or maybe this entire thing had nothing to do with the people in the city, and Zattsu Tsun just wanted to barter the stolen goods for copper plates.

Or maybe... Zattsu Tsun and Tay Tsun were lying, and this was all the doing of the bandits.

Without evidence, anything was possible.

"Hmmm. Is his personality just twisted, or did he really exploit Zattsu Tsun to commit all these crimes... I don't think we can continue to negotiate without clearing this up."

"That's right. Kamyua Yost also mentioned that we have to get the evidence during this period of time. In order to do so, he hopes the denizens of Forest's Edge can lend him a hand."

Kamyua Yost, huh.

That suspicious man with a retarded smile was having a private conference with the tribal chiefs inside the Wu clan main house. I wondered how much help the Forest's Edge would be in this conspiracy-laced incident. I couldn't imagine that at all and couldn't calm down.

I wondered what Ai Fa who had been keeping quiet thought. When I was about to turn and look her way, Leina Wu walked up to me with a freshly grilled hamburg steak on a plate.

"Asuta, I made it as you instructed. Can you try the finished product?"

The meat patty on the plate was about 180 g, around the size used in a [Kiba burger],

and grilled just right.

The color and tenderness were impeccable. Even though the patty didn't have any condiments on it, it still should be incredibly delicious.

I relaxed my serious face, picked up a spoon and said: "I'm digging in."

I cut the patty with my spoon, and a translucent liquid flowed onto the plate.

The inside of the patty was thoroughly cooked too.

I sent the piece of meat into my mouth, and the deliciousness I was expecting spread inside my mouth cavity.

"Yes, this is perfect. The amount of diced aria is just right, and the tenderness of the meat is outstanding... It's been a while since I ate meat patty without any sauce; the kiba is really tasty."

In the meat patty were just diced aria and a dash of rock salt and Pico leaves, but that was already incredibly delicious. I couldn't help smiling, and Leina Wu also smiled happily when she saw me.

"I wanted to ask if you really mean it, but I feel relieved just looking at Asuta's face. I think the meat patty is a little too big though."

"Well, the meat patty will be stored inside Pico leaves before being grilled on the morning and will lose a lot of moisture. So we need to make it this thick at this juncture."

"Ah, so that's the reason. I understand. So... Can you let Shela Wu and I take on the task of preparing 60 meat patties?"

"Okay, I will leave this to you then. Please try to make them the same size, okay?"

Leina Wu replied with a smile: "Okay."

It was a perfect smile, full of pride and confidence.

Leina Wu's facial features had always been fine, but I thought she had gotten even more charming lately.

“Oh, Ai Fa and Kaslan Lutim, want to have a taste? If I leave it all to Asuta, he will be full before dinner.”

Leina Wu was always so considerate.

Kaslan Lutim nodded generously and took the spoon from me.

“Ah, this is heavenly. I hope the women in house Lutim can learn such skills too.”

“Ara, Ema Min Lutim’s hamburg steak tastes delicious too, right?”

Leina Wu smiled bashfully, and Kaslan Lutim scratched his head with a: “Haha.”



After seeing this warm interaction between them, Ai Fa picked up the spoon awkwardly.

She then scooped up a small piece and shoved it into her mouth.

Ai Fa said with a blank face: "Hmm... Leina Wu's cooking has improved a lot."

Leina Wu asked happily: "Really?"

"It's encouraging to hear Ai Fa saying that since she eats Asuta's cooking every day."

Leina Wu who was all smiles and the expressionless Ai Fa looked at each other in silence for a moment.

Before this silence turned awkward, Leina Wu looked back at me:

"Well then, I'm going back to work. Thank you very much, Asuta."

"Sorry for troubling you."

Leina Wu turned back and returned to Shela Wu with brisk steps.

And... she didn't seem to notice that I was a little worried about Ai Fa. It looked like she was trying to suppress her own emotions.

"...Hey, Ai Fa, are you alright?":

I whispered to her quietly.

Is she going to tell me: "The hamburg steak you make for me tastes better than that!"? I felt a little uneasy.

Ai Fa scratched the tip of her nose; she moved her mouth as if she couldn't hold it in anymore.

She made a face I wasn't expecting... She looked very satisfied, with a proud and confident smile that was on par with Leina Wu earlier.

After surprising me, Ai Fa whispered to me with a smile:

“...She had improved a lot, but Asuta’s hamburg steak still tastes better.”

After saying that, she poked my sideburn.

“But her improvement surprised me a lot. Asuta, don’t fall behind now.”

I could only answer: “Yes...”

Compared to Leina Wu’s and Shela Wu’s, my hamburg steak wasn’t that far ahead... I felt a sense of shame as I thought that and decided not to tell anyone about this.

“Hyaa! Asuta, what goodies are you eating!”

I heard a sudden yell.

A tall and slender figure was standing at the kitchen entrance together with a petite person.

They were Kamyua Yost and Ludo Wu.

“Ara, thank you for your hard work. Your private conference with the tribal chiefs is over?”

“Yes, I finally got them to agree to my request. We should be able to grab Pyschkurewuss by the tail before the 15th of next month.”

Kamyua Yost answered as he stared at the plate in my hands.

Ludo Wu who noticed that walked right in and snatched the plate from me.

“Since it’s my house’s kitchen, can I have a taste?”

“Ahh, Ludo Wu, save some for me, at least a bite.”

Kamyua Yost was treating Ludo Wu so casually that it felt weird to me.

But Ludo Wu didn’t seem to mind this suspicious man and left just a bite of hamburg steak to him as requested.

“Oh, Kaslan Lutim, thank you for your hard work. Have you explained everything to

Asuta?”

Kamyua Yost ate the bite of hamburg steak cherishingly as he said that to Kaslan Lutim.

“I have explained everything that I could to him.”

“That’s great. Let me add on to that.”

Kamyua Yost said with a leisurely smile: “Asuta, after listening to what Kaslan Lutim said, you probably think that Pyschkurewuss is a vicious man.”

“That’s right.”

“But Asuta, if you get a chance to meet Pyschkurewuss, your impression of him might get overturned. I hope you won’t think Kaslan Lutim’s impression of him is mistaken.”

“What?”

I was confused by his words.

But I could sense that Kamyua Yost, the man who was always pretending to be retarded, had very serious eyes.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand you at all. Can you explain further?”

“Ah, my bad. Well, I’m sure of this only during today’s meeting. Pyschkurewuss looks down on the denizens of Forest’s Edge. Much more than I expected.”

“Looks down on the denizens of Forest’s Edge?”

“Correct. Those weren’t eyes one looks at a fellow man. Instead, it gave impression as if he was looking at a filthy animal beneath that of a man.”

Kamyua Yost said something dangerous offhandedly.

“Simply put, those are his eyes when looking at a slave. And... he is someone who doesn’t think of slaves as people. The slaves in the western kingdom are actually from the northern kingdom.”

“From the northern kingdom, that means...”

“Yes, where my mother is from, the enemy of the western kingdom, Mahildra. Pyschkurewuss has always loathed a northern mixed blood like me entering the city on Marquis Genos’ invitation. And, of course... he also looks at me as if I am some kind of filthy animal.”

“...”

“Genos is located close to the southern edge of the western kingdom. The people here will probably never meet anyone from Mahildra in their lifetime. But that Pyschkurewuss went out of his way to get slave merchants to travel here from the north to buy slaves to work for him. This is nothing special in the northern cities though. The captives from a hostile nation are either killed or enslaved.”

I felt more and more troubled as I listened.

But Kamyua Yost smiled cheerfully.

“But in actual fact, the people who work with slaves more, are less likely to treat them harshly. Many landlords reward slaves for their efficient work and even recognize marriage between slaves. Those who treat slaves inhumanely are the minority. And that Pyschkurewuss... belongs to the minority.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Well, after the conference today, I can feel that Pyschkurewuss thinks of the denizens of Forest’s Edge as an important labor force, but not his equal. I have always suspected that, and after seeing his murky eyes when he looks at the denizens of Forest’s Edge, I am now sure of it.”

Kaslan Lutim looked at Kamyua Yost calmly.

Noticing his gaze, Kamyua Yost smiled casually.

“There aren’t many people in the Post Station Town who look at the denizens of Forest’s Edge with such disdain. The townsfolk might not think of the Forest’s Edge denizens as fellow citizens, but they don’t think the denizens aren’t people.”

“I still can’t really understand slavery and the conflict between the north and west.

But Pyschkurewuss' eyes feel unsettling to me."

Kaslan Lutim was still collected, but I was the opposite.

Ai Fa stood beside me; Kaslan Lutim, Ludo Wu, Leina Wu, and Shela Wu were here too.

They were all important people to me. To not treat these charming people as humans... That was beyond my comprehension.

"...And so, even though Asuta is a denizen of Forest's Edge, your appearance is still that of a westerner. At the very least, you don't have the features of a Forest's Edge denizen or someone from the north. Pyschkurewuss might treat Asuta humanely, so I hope you don't get confused by that."

"Thank you for telling me this precious information. But... isn't it possible that I won't ever meet that Pyschkurewuss?"

"Yes, I can only pray that won't ever happen."

So there was still a chance.

What a creepy thought.

I took a deep breath, expelled the miasma in my heart, and faced Kamyua Yost with refreshed emotions.

"So, what is the request that you got the tribal chiefs to agree to, Kamyua? This is the first thing you asked for something from the Forest's Edge, correct?"

"Yes. I don't have even help this time, so I want them to lend me some men to look for someone."

"Look for someone?"

"That's right. I plan to leave Genos and search in the neighboring cities. The person I'm looking for is a survivor of the 'Red Beard Gang'. Kaslan Lutim already told you about them, correct?"

I held my breath.

What was he planning?

“Actually, I already made a decision to search for that person. We can figure out what happened to the ‘Red Beard Gang’ ten years ago if the search bears fruit. I want to uncover Pyschkurewuss crimes this way.”

“Wasn’t that bandit gang destroyed a decade ago, with all the members executed?”

“Yes, but only that person somehow escaped the encirclement by the subjugation team. And she is also someone close to the boss, so she should know what actually happened back then.”

“She? That person is a woman?”

“Yes. She was the significant other of red beard Goram, the boss of the ‘Red Beard Gang’. She was a great fighter serving as the lieutenant of the boss and stayed home after giving birth. That’s why she wasn’t caught.”

The significant other of the bandit boss... Could they get a useful testimony from someone like that?

I better let Kamyua Yost be the judge of that. I had something else to ask him.

“You want the denizens of Forest’s Edge to help in your search? And the tribal chiefs actually agreed?”

“Yes. Donda Wu and the others feel that if Pyschkurewuss’ wrongdoings aren’t uncovered, the conference won’t progress. Even Graff Zaza feels a suspicious man like me is better than that Pyschkurewuss.”

Kamyua Yost said and smiled like a Cheshire cat.

“In any case, Malfreed can’t deploy his troops as he wishes, and he can’t leave Genos either. I’m glad you guys can understand our constraints. By the way... the Wu clan loaned me three men, and I’m teaching them how to ride a Totos right now. I plan to ride at dawn.”

Letting the denizens of Forest’s Edge travel outside of Genos on a Totos, what an unexpected development.

“Tch! That’s so interesting! If I don’t have to guard the stall, I want to go too!”

Ludo Wu said relaxedly.

I looked Kamyua Yost in the eyes and said:

“Kamyua Yost, can we trust you on this?”

“Yes. Uncovering the wrongdoings of Pyschkurewuss is closely related to a bright future for Forest’s Edge too, correct?”

The tribal chief of Forest’s Edge, Donda Wu has already agreed to this proposal anyway.

I could only put my faith in them.

“I understand. I will await your safe return. Will you be back before the conference...?”

“Yes. The hunters of the Wu clan have a vacation right now too, so the timing is just right. But... I want to return as soon as possible. I don’t know what Pyschkurewuss is scheming by pushing the conference back for another half a month.”

Kamyua Yost’s purple eyes lighted up clearly.

“I hope you guys can stay on your guard too, Asuta. Pyschkurewuss didn’t mention your business during today’s conference, which is a surprise. Since Asuta is the one who built a relationship with the Post Station Town, he should be an existence Pyschkurewuss can’t ignore. Well then... I’m looking forward to eating Asuta’s dishes again in a few days time.”

Chapter 4

Part 1

The next day, the 31st of the Blue month, the number of escorts increased to four.

This was because of the ominous warning by Kamyua Yost and Ai Fa's comment that she could sense someone watching us.

The additional members were Shin Wu and a youth from the Wu clan branch house I wasn't familiar with. Unfortunately, we couldn't ask the head of the Lei house Rau Lei to be our guard so easily.

"And Rau Lei has a short fuse. Aren't you worried about him interacting with the people in town?"

These were Ludo Wu's actual words.

If Donda Wu was worried about that when making this decision, it was indeed an appropriate concern. I wouldn't be surprised for the people of the city to use some sort of scheme in town.

We could only start doing the day's work, with no idea how guarded we should be.

Aside from the possibility of Pyschkurewuss acting behind the scenes, there was another matter lingering in the corner of my heart.

And, of course, it's about Shumimaru's leaving Genos today and the issue with Vena Wu.

"...Vena Wu, is your leg fine?"

While attending to the [Myam-roasted meat] stall I directed my question towards the [Kiba burger] stall, and Vena Wu responded calmly: "Yes... I'm fine..."

Vena Wu had finally returned to her job at the stall.

But the feet she was concealing had not recovered completely yet, so she couldn't return to her job without a wagon ferrying her.

And with the guards here, there was no need for Vena Wu to stay with me. She had asked Mama Mia Lei to let Leina Wu and her to work at the Post Station Town on alternate days.

"Erm, when is that easterner coming?"

Lala Wu who was tending the [Myam-roasted meat] stall asked softly.

"Who knows. Usually, he would be here by now."

"Ah... I'm getting worked up over this. He isn't proposing marriage, so why am I so flustered?"

I was flustered too, but I didn't know whether it was due to the same reason as Lala Wu.

Speaking of which, why was Lala Wu so worked up?

"I don't understand! But, do you think that easterner's intentions are so serious so he would propose a marriage? That's why I'm so flustered."

Lala Wu put her hand on her chest as she said that, and took a deep breath.

"It will be great if Vena-nee finds a good husband soon. Then things won't become so troubling!"

"...Is it troubling for Shumimaru and Vena Wu to be together?"

"Obviously! By the way... I'm not too sure, but is changing one's faith a serious matter in town?"

"I'm not very sure, but it seems so."

"Ah, Asuta doesn't know about the four gods in the first place. What an incredible tale! Anyway... Changing faith means cutting ties with their family, you know? I don't want that!"

“Well, living apart doesn’t mean that you won’t see each other again... Ah, how do I put this... I better not say something irresponsible.”

“It’s the same everywhere; marrying away means living apart from one’s family. I don’t want Vena-nee to leave Forest’s Edge and not be a tribe mate anymore.”

Lala Wu lowered her brows slightly and bit her lips.

This strong-willed girl would occasionally show such a cute face.

“...What about a foreigner marrying into the Wu clan?”

“Huh? That’s good I guess? Then Vena-nee will still be my family.”

“Ah, so that works?”

“I don’t really mind. Mama Mia Lei probably won’t mind either. I’m not sure about Papa Donda...”

Donda Wu, huh.

I wondered what were his thoughts on this.

“He probably won’t agree. If the easterner marries in, he can’t do the work of a hunter properly. He does business in the Genos city, right? Why would such a man give up his lifestyle and marry into Forest’s Edge?”

“So Lala Wu wouldn’t mind?”

“Yes. I’m fine with anyone as long as Vena-nee is happy.”

Lala Wu resembled Ludo Wu not just in their expressions, but thinking as well.

Anyway, Ludo Wu wished his sister to be happy even if Vena Wu were to leave Forest’s Edge.

But their marriage isn’t that easy...

Abandoning one’s hometown, friends, and way of life, and marrying into Forest’s Edge... Even a foreigner like me could imagine how preposterous this was.

What about marrying out?

Vena Wu yearned for the world outside of Forest's Edge too.

And the denizens of Forest's Edge worshipped the forest as a god and didn't display any devotion towards the four main deities. In that case, they were less resistant to the idea of changing one's faith.

But I didn't think this was such a simple matter. Even if the subject herself wasn't resistant to this idea, she wouldn't be able to live in the western kingdom and the Forest's Edge, if she changed her faith.

Shumimaru didn't have any family and ran a business. After leaving his hometown, he would tour around the western and northern kingdom for almost a year. He definitely couldn't leave Vena Wu in Semu alone, since she didn't know anyone there.

Then he just needed to tour the world together with Vena Wu...

No, that wasn't realistic at all.

Shumimaru must have had considered all these, which was why he told me it was difficult.

Anyway... I can only hope that Vena Wu will accept Shumimaru's gift.

With worry and tiredness rising in our mind, Lala Wu and I sighed.

At this moment, Ai Fa said coldly: "She's here again..."

"How annoying! Is this your attitude towards a customer?"

It was the southern girl Dell.

Dell stuck her tongue out at Ai Fa who was acting like a bouncer and then stood before the [Myam-roasted meat] stall with a smile.

"I'm visiting again today! Asuta, I have a request."

"Ahh, welcome. Hmm...? If you are alternating every day, shouldn't you be buying [Kiba burger] today?"

“Hmm? It’s fine since it’s tasty! Asuta is over here, so I want this one.”

Her first day’s attitude was like a lie. Dell smiled brightly, and Ai Fa crossed her arms and glared at me when she saw that innocent smile.

Actually, I told Kamyua Yost about this girl yesterday. It was very unlikely for Pyschkurewuss to be involved with a girl like her visiting my stall.

“Oh, the merchants from Zealand? I know them; they are the steel smith merchants that got invited to stay in Pyschkurewuss’ manor. Malfreed has already investigated the people visiting Genos recently. They are here purely for business and are neither the pawns of Pyschkurewuss nor will do anything to the denizens of Forest’s Edge.”

Kamyua Yost’s words wiped away my worries for now.

But the fact remained that they were involved with Pyschkurewuss, so I should still keep my distance. So I wore my professional smile and attended to this girl.

“Ah, smells nice! Can this be reheated in the stove?”

“Huh? But why?”

“I want the people in the city to try it too! They all say that kiba isn’t edible and won’t believe me at all!”

Her words gave me goosebumps.

“E-Erm, the dish will spoil after some time! It will be bad if you get food poisoning. So please don’t bring the dish into the city.”

“Huh!? Since I bought it with my money, I’m free to do whatever I want with it.”

Dell stopped smiling and puffed her cheeks.

“B-But many people in Genos don’t welcome the denizens of Forest’s Edge and kiba. You know that, right?”

“Hmm? I don’t really know, but there are many denizens of Forest’s Edge who look scary, so they are just intimidated by them, correct?”

Dell said as she looked at Ai Fa with loathsome eyes.

Ai Fa looked back at her icily.

“This is not that simple. The kiba is a symbol of disaster, so the denizens of Forest’s Edge who eat kiba get treated as the harbinger of catastrophe... And they also changed their faith from the southern god to the western one. Because of their heritage, people don’t see them as fellow citizens, and the relationship with the townsfolk didn’t improve after all this time.”

“What? That’s too strange! The denizens of Forest’s Edge abandoned Jaguar decades ago and still aren’t accepted as fellow citizens here?”

I was shocked; she didn’t even know that?

So that was the extent of what a foreigner doing business in the city would know. Despite being fellow Genos citizens, the people in the city and the denizens of Forest’s Edge had no proper interactions at all. Pyschkurewuss was the only exception, and I didn’t think he would take the chance to talk about the Forest’s Edge with merchants.

That’s right... someone in the city might never have the chance to meet a denizen of Forest’s Edge. The relationship between the Post Station townsfolk and the denizens of Forest’s Edge is of no importance to them.

This was a new revelation.

However, what kind of answer would denizens of Forest’s Edge get if they asked this question?

I decided to focus on the problem at hand right now and answered Dell:

“...Anyway, I can imagine the troubles that will be caused by bringing a kiba dish into the city. I still want to run my business in peace here, so can you reconsider?”

Dell moaned for a while and then answered disappointedly: “Okay.”

“I just want to surprise them. But... if it will cause trouble for Asuta, I will give it up.”

Her face looked like a puppy with droopy ears.

After thanking her, I tossed the meat and aria into the middle of the griddle.

“Just one? That will be two red copper plates.”

“Yes! I didn’t eat anything before coming, so make it tastier, alright?”

Dell cheered up and smiled gleefully.

As her infectious smile made me smile in return, I heard the voice of a new customer:
“Ahh, long time no see!”

I turned back and found a westerner girl with long brown hair standing there with a smile as bright as Dell’s. Her figure was as thicc as Vena Wu, and her ivory skin looked rather sexy. She was Yumi from the 『West Wind Inn』.

“Ah, hello. It has been a while.”

“I have to work in the inn, so it’s hard for me to sneak out before noon! But I still came every day, you know?”

“Yes, I heard about that. Thank you for your regular patronage.”

She and Uncle Dora were westerner regulars which was rare in my stall. I had less chance of seeing them now, but I was still grateful towards them.

Will she... find trouble with western customers?

I looked away uneasily, and Dell put her hands on the counter like a dog begging for food. Her escort Lavis had already handed the money to Lala Wu.

“Ah, pardon me. I will make it right away, so wait a moment.”

“Yes!”

Dell smiled brilliantly. She was the world’s best in terms of the speed her face changed.

And, for some reason, Yumi stopped smiling and started observing Dell.

“I have never seen you before. Are you a friend of Asuta?”

“Hmm? We aren’t really friends though?”

Dell looked back at her puzzledly.

Yumi flicked her hair with a grunt.

“You are a regular of this stall then? I don’t remember seeing a southern girl like you.”

“Regular, huh. I have visited four days in a row!”

I shrugged quietly. She hadn’t paid for the first day yet.

But now wasn’t the time to take it easy. Yumi stared at me, her gaze turning icier with every passing moment.

“...Asuta, what’s going on here?”

“Ah? W-What do you mean?”

“Didn’t you say you use honorifics with me because I’m a customer!? Then why do you speak to a little girl that just came four days ago like a friend!?”

That seemed to have triggered Yumi.

By the way, I remember Yumi saying the same thing to a kid like Tara. She only relented when I explained to her that I got to know Tara before opening the stall.

“N-No, that’s... It became like this before I realized it...”

“Before you realized it? I don’t get you!”

“How annoying. If you are here to buy food, just eat it quietly.”

Dell took a bite of the [Myam-roasted meat] I gave her and answered calmly.

Did the pot just call the kettle black!? Even though I was thinking about that in my heart, Dell didn’t seem agitated about Yumi getting mad, which was a relief. It looked that Dell could deal with southerners and westerners reasonably.

“...Asuta, you have two choices.”

But Yumi was already fuming.

Yumi raised two tender fingers with an angry face and shoved them up to the tip of my nose.

“You can either stop talking to me in such a formal tone, or you can treat all your patrons the same way. Asuta, what will you choose?”

“Erm... It’s difficult to change the way I have been speaking for the past month...”

“So you won’t talk to me in a formal tone now, correct?”

Dell smiled angelically.

I didn’t know whether she would cry or get mad if I failed to meet her expectations, and just thinking about it put my heart in a turmoil. That was how her smile was.

So I could only answer: “Yes.”. Yumi yelled: “That’s too sly!” when she heard that.

“Don’t just bully me! And I have known you for longer than her, how mean!”

“You are too loud. I’m going to call the guards on you for disrupting his business, you know?”

Dell took large bites of her [Myam-roasted meat] with a satisfied smile, while I sighed without letting Yumi notice.

I only noticed an icy gaze staring at my right cheek.

I turned back and it was my beloved house head casting a sideways gaze at me.

I asked her why she was mad with my eyes. She answered with her gaze that I was being annoying.

We were of one mind, which showed the bonds within the Fa house.

“Erm... I can’t do this right away; we need to find a way to resolve this in a more peaceful manner...”

I said in an attempt to mediate, but Yumi leaned towards me with her brows raised high.

“Are you serious about trying to change...?”

“Yes... Erm... I will do what I can...”

Yumi sighed heavily and then put two red copper plates onto the counter.

“Thank you for your patronage... No, thanks...”

“I don’t feel you are trying at all!”

“I can’t change immediately.”

I started cooking the [Myam-roasted meat] . She was better than Rau Lei who resorted to violence immediately.

Yumi looked at Dell haughtily.

“...Just who are you? It’s rare seeing a southern girl in Genos; is your family merchants?”

“Yes, I’m with a steel smith merchant from Zealand.”

Dell answered Yumi impatiently as she finished off her food.

“Fufu, a steel smith merchant, huh. That has nothing to do with me... But why are you wearing boy’s clothes?”

“Hmm...? How can I wear flimsy clothes in the Post Station Town? It’s me who should be asking you, aren’t you afraid of being targeted by delinquents if you dressed like that?”

“If I was afraid of delinquents, I wouldn’t live in the Post Station Town. You sure are delicate.”

Yumi looked down at Dell with her arms crossed.

When I first met this girl, she was with a group of delinquent-like youths.

By the way, she was wearing a tank top and had accessories that clattered noisily and a long dress that went from her waist to her ankles. This was a popular attire amongst westerners. Her feet that were showing under her dress looked really mesmerizing.

“Hmm, I don’t understand this custom. Since you are so cute, why don’t you grow your hair out? Otherwise you’ll get mistaken for a boy.”

Yes, I was one of those who were mistaken.

When I was just thinking that, Dell’s calm face started turning flushed.

“Annoying! I’m free to cut or grow out my hair!? Don’t tease me just because you look a little pretty!”

“Uwah!”

Yumi let out a weird scream.

I never expected for Dell to grab one of Yumi’s soft breasts with her right hand.



Yumi shook off Dell's hand and sat onto the ground weakly with her face red.

"W-What are you doing!? Don't surprise me like that!"

"Hmmp! So you are fine with that if I don't surprise you? Shall I tell you in advance next time?"

Dell curled her fingers into a wriggly claw and went near Yumi.

Yumi backed away with her arms around herself.

At this moment, Ai Fa grabbed Dell's slender shoulders and said: "Hey! Don't cause trouble in front of the stall. Girl from the south, you are not reflecting on your actions at all."

Dell looked back at Ai Fa in surprise.

And then, the young man Lavis who had been standing at the side like a shadow walked towards Ai Fa with his hand on his sword hilt.

"Denizen of Forest's Edge, remove your hand from Dell-sama. If not... I won't hold back."

"Oh? So there are many southerners with no regards for the law?"

Ai Fa didn't waver at all as she unhanded Dell.

Dell said a little agitatedly in a quiet voice: "Don't be like this, Lavis."

"It's my fault. Asuta... I'm sorry."

"Ah, it's fine..."

"I apologize to you too. I... can't help myself when people talk about my hair."

"H-Hair...?"

"...My hair color is disgusting so it won't look as nice as yours even if I grow it out. If not for that, I wouldn't want others to mistake me for a boy too."

Dell bit her lips quietly after saying that.

Yumi stood up slowly and walked to Dell with her hands guarding her breasts.

“...What’s so disgusting about it? Your hair color is just a little uncommon.”

“It is! It’s like the color of feral animals!”

Dell’s face twisted sadly as she ruffled her hair.

The color of her brown hair was uneven and did look a little like that of a cat or dog. But I didn’t find it disgusting at all.

“Is that so. But everyone has their own preferences.”

Yumi put her hands on Dell’s messy hair.

“But I don’t think this color is disgusting, that’s why I want you to grow it out. Sorry if that upset you.”

Dell lowered her head without a word.

Yumi had a sincere and apologetic face.

“...Y-You aren’t mad?”

“Yes. I was just surprised.”

“I see. It... felt really soft and comfortable though.”

Yumi ruffled Dell’s hair roughly: “Don’t say it out loud!”

Dell fled from her with a laugh.

“Sorry, I will be heading back now. I still have a job to do in the afternoon. Asuta... Can I come tomorrow?”

“Huh? Yes, of course.”

Dell left with brisk steps after saying: “...Thanks.”

Lavis followed her after glaring at Ai Fa.

“What a weirdo! But never mind... She isn’t a bad person.”:

Yumi said with a sigh.

“Are you alright?”

When she heard me, she guarded her breasts for some reason and glared at me with scary eyes.

“Hurry up already! I have work to do too!”

“Oh? Yes, my deep apologies...”

“Language!”

“Right! My bad!”

My manner of speech was like Mida’s right now.

Lala Wu held back her laugh as she turned away, while Yumi snatched the [Myam-roasted meat] from me in a rage.

“Really now, I’m here for formal business with you, but it got messed up... Well, Asuta, you are selling your food at the 『Big Tree of the South Inn』 and the 『Cryptic Venerable Inn』, right?”

“Hmm? Erm, yes?”

“So you adjusted the taste according to the preferences of the southerners and easterners, correct? For a westerner like me, which inn would you recommend?”

“Huh? May I ask the reason for your query?”

“Are you doing that on purpose?”

“No, of course not!”

Lala Wu’s shoulders were quivering, and Yumi sighed.

“Recently, I noticed we are losing westerner customers to these two inns. My dad has finally made up his mind.”

“Finally... What does he want to do?”

“I don’t know yet. Maybe he wants Asuta to make some karon or kimyusu meat dish.”

Yumi’s father, the innkeeper of the 『West Wind Inn』, seemed very wary of the denizens of Forest’s Edge and kiba.

But he wasn’t born and bred in Genos, and only moved here from another town when he was young. His hatred didn’t have any specific reason; he was just affected by the atmosphere in the Post Station Town. That was what Yumi deduced.

Which meant that Yumi was wary of the denizens of Forest’s Edge for the same reason too. Her hatred faded off after meeting me at my stall.

“Yes, but it will be meaningless if I don’t use kiba in the dish. Like I mentioned last time, instead of making money, I started doing business in order to let everyone understand how delicious kiba is.”

“Yes, I know. But my stubborn dad has sent me here to try your dish in order to ascertain Asuta’s skills. Not long ago, he got mad at me and my mom when I bought your cooking in secret! Isn’t that amazing?”

Yumi then leaned her face over the counter with a serious face.

“What happens next would depend on Asuta’s capability. If Asuta manages to convince my dad to try the kiba dish, we can smash that rock head of his into smithereens! Ah... Did I say something wilful again?”

“No, you are right. Just getting him interested will make me happy.”

Selling kiba for westerner travelers in an inn operated by westerners would be a big improvement.

If possible, I wanted to take this first step in the 『Kimyusu’s Tail Inn』, but I couldn’t let this chance slip.

I also learned that the evidence of that incident a decade of ago wasn’t treated seriously.

If Pyschkurewuss isn't targeting Milano Mast, I can just talk about that incident openly in the [[Kimyusu's Tail Inn]].

I showed a forthright smile towards Yumi as I thought about this.

"Thank you. If Yumi's father is really interested, I will work hard to make him understand the deliciousness of kiba."

Yumi opened her eyes wide.

Her ivory skin looked a little red, maybe because of the heat from the griddle.

"...So you can talk properly after all."

"Ah, is that so? I might get conscious of it once I calm down though."

"And... You remembered my name?"

"Huh? I remembered your name a long time ago!"

That might be so, but I never had the chance to call her by her name. Not just Yumi, I had not addressed Pops Balan and Arudas by their names either.

Yumi giggled and then pulled her body back.

"I'm glad..."

"Hmm? Glad about what?"

"Nothing! The [[Big Tree of the South Inn]] and the [[Cryptic Venerable Inn]], which do you recommend?"

"Erm, well, I plan to change the menu slowly tomorrow, but the dish in the [[Cryptic Venerable Inn]] uses a spice from Semu called Chitto, so the food from the [[Big Tree of the South Inn]] should suit you better. By the way... Have you tried dishes made with Tau sauce before?"

"I never tried it before, but that's a seasoning from Jaguar, correct? I heard that name before."

“Is that so? It doesn’t taste as strong as Chitto, so I think it will be easier for others to accept. In any case, I don’t just focus on the easterners or southerners alone when I set my menu.”

“I understand. I will try the 『Big Tree of the South Inn』 then! I’m looking forward to it.”

Yumi then smiled more brilliantly than before, which was great.

“Thank you. I won’t waste the opportunity given to me by Yumi and will work hard.”

“Yes! Do your best! But I can only tell the truth if it really does taste bad though.”

“Yes, I’m looking forward to Yumi’s thoughts on this.”

I breathed a sigh of relief as I watched the smiling Yumi leave.

I then felt a gaze on my right cheek.

Turning back, I found Ai Fa staring silently at me.

I asked with my eyes what she was being mad about.

She answered with her gaze that I was annoying.

Our wordless conversation wasn’t so cheery this time.

As I was thinking that, a tall cloaked figure approached us from the north.

It was an easterner. But it wasn’t Shumimaru or Sangjura. This person was easily over 190 cm tall, which was rare even for a Semu.

“Welcome. Do you want one?”

“No, two, give me.”

He replied as he pushed his hood away.

Aside from Shumimaru and Sangjura, no one else had ever gone out of their way to show their face.

“Asuta, me, you know?”

“Huh?”

“Me, ‘Silver Vase’ deputy bandleader, Radajiddo Nafashiāru.”

I didn’t recognize him at all. He had dark hair and eyes, and his long face was typical of a Semu.

But I did remember someone this tall amongst the members of the Silver Vase.

“So you are a part of the ‘Silver Vase’. Are you alone today?”

“Yes. Today, busy. Everyone, buy food, separate.”

With that, Radajiddo turned his gaze towards the [Kiba burger] stall.

“Asuta, Vena Wu, something tell you, I have.”

Vena Wu turned slowly towards him.

Radajiddo continued in a strong and booming voice:

“Bandleader Shumimaru, urgent matter. Will come late, Asuta, Vena Wu.”

I asked him: “An urgent matter?”

Radajiddo nodded at Vena Wu.

“Close stall, he come. Go [Kimyusu’s Tail Inn] , he will. Time come, bid farewell.”

“I see. As expected, he is busy on the very last day. Hmm... But does Shumimaru know that Vena Wu is in the Post Station Town today?”

“Knows he. Shumimaru, since morning, in city. But brethren, about stall, inform him. Shumimaru, knows.”

“I see.”

Speaking of which, it was almost noon and Pops Balan still hadn’t come.

The excitement of my conversation with Yumi started to subside.

“Shumimaru, come, definitely. Lunch, give him, I will.”

Radajiddo said as he returned his gaze back to me.

“‘Silver Vase’, ten people, come definitely. We, meet Asuta, thank you.”

“No, I’m the one who should be grateful for making your acquaintances.”

Radajiddo said emotionlessly: “Farewell, close stall, after.”

But I could feel a gleeful gaze similar to Shumimaru behind his squinting dark eyes.

Part 2

Afternoon, after Rii Sudora arrived to start her shift, we set off for the 『Cryptic Venerable Inn』.

I had already entrusted the jerky preordered by Pops Balan to Shela Wu. After asking the Wu clan and their six kin houses, and the five minor houses near us, we managed to gather 2 kg of jerky.

The revenue of 30 white copper plates was split amongst the twelve houses, so each house didn't earn much this time. I gave priority to the minor houses the previous round, so I divided the task equally amongst all the houses this time.

And with permission from my house head, the Fa house also prepared a little gift for our regular guest.

The food I was researching right now was [Kiba bacon]. I was trying to make the smoked jerky that was as tough as wood more tender.

The moisture was removed by covering it with salt, and the dried meat was then smoked with herbs. Forest's Edge method of making jerky was basically the same as making bacon. But the priority in making jerky was its preservation effect, so the moisture needed to be completely removed. The end result was so tough that a weak person like me couldn't bite through it.

There weren't any chilling facilities here, and the weather in Forest's Edge and Genos was like early summer in Japan, so it was only natural for them to prioritize preservation. However, I wanted to know if it was possible to make the bacon I was familiar with... Could I make it more tender by shortening its shelf life a little? Whenever the Fa house made jerky, I used a small portion of it for research.

Whether it was the amount of salt, the marinating time with salt, how long it was left to dry after removing the salt, the length of time used to smoke it with herbs, or other ways to improve the smoking method such as the possibility of using Pico leaves which could remove moisture efficiently... I tried all sorts of methods, but still had no answer at hand. Right now, I could only make bacon that was very close to being a jerky. I could barely manage to bite through it, and the shelf life was just a week.

It was still far from my ideal standard of a bacon. But if I imagined myself to be a

traveler cooking it with poitan and aria, it would taste much better than normal jerky.

Jerky needed to be cooked until it turned into mush so it tasted like bland rubbery pieces of meat. But the bacon-like meat I made could retain its original flavor.

I used belly meat for this, as its fat had a thicker texture when made into jerky, so it greatly influenced the taste. I prepared 2 kg of such bacon meat for each group.

It had to be consumed within seven days and didn't need to be cooked as long as jerky. This was a parting gift for their support of our stall for the past month, so they didn't need to pay. I left the stall after telling Shela Wu about these three points.

Was doing this against the customs of the Post Station Town?

Even so, I still couldn't suppress my feelings of wanting to present farewell gifts to Pops' company of architects and the Silver Vase.

If I found out that Pops turned down the bacon when I linked up with the others, I would probably cry. With this unease in my heart, I went south down the stone-paved street towards [[Cryptic Venerable Inn]] .

I was accompanied by Vena Wu, Shin Wu, and Ai Fa. Ludo Wu and the youth from the branch house stayed back in the stall.

Vena Wu sighed sadly beside me.

"...Vena Wu, are you okay?"

"Yes... I just want to settle this troublesome matter earlier..."

Her strides were brisk and favored her right leg a little. The profile of her face was emotionless, so, as expected, she was very melancholic.

Will she accept Shumimaru's gift?

These words were stuck in my throat, and I managed to swallow them back.

Vena Wu had sort of confessed to me. Given my relationship with her, it wasn't really convenient for me to ask her about Shumimaru.

Just what kind of emotions did Vena Wu have when flirting with me? What were the fundamental feelings she felt? Was it curiosity and obsession? Her yearning for the outside world? Or just pure feelings of love... I didn't really understand, and Vena Wu probably didn't either.

The denizens of Forest's Edge probably relied more on instincts to choose a spouse, in contrast to my previous world. Mama Mia Lei already confessed to Donda Wu the second time they met, while their daughter Leina Wu fell for me very quickly.

Thinking that this was the custom in Forest's Edge with just these two examples was probably jumping to conclusions. However, their family Vena Wu launched a more direct attack in an even shorter amount of time.

Just how did she think about Shumimaru.

What were her thoughts about Shumimaru's feelings?

I didn't really understand the way of this world, and couldn't understand.

"...What's the matter? You have been gloomy since just now."

Ai Fa walked over and leaned towards me.

"If you are worried about something, don't hold it in, Asuta."

"No, I'm fine. I'm just thinking about something."

I shook my head at Ai Fa, whose gaze was twenty percent sharper than usual.

"What about you, Ai Fa? Is that gaze still there today?"

"It's gone now. There were just a few people staring at us yesterday. It will be great if that's the end of it."

If there wasn't any concrete evidence, Ai Fa wouldn't be able to relax.

But the next conference was half a month away.

The Wu clan which had started its hunting offseason was still alright, but Ai Fa couldn't neglect her hunting work yet. Since there was less kiba around the Wu clan village,

that meant the kiba was roaming in the other areas.

Due to the Tsun clan deserting their hunting duties, it disrupted the hunting cycle greatly. At the very least, the number of kiba around the Fa house didn't decrease at all. The neighboring Fou and Lan houses were successful in their hunts too.

Ai Fa seemed to have understood what I was thinking and said: "...I'm thinking about hunting on alternate days before the 15th of the White Month. So I'm planning to take turns with the Wu clan to perform escort duties... Asuta, don't cause any trouble while I'm not looking."

"I got it. By the way, did I ever cause trouble in the Post Station Town before?"

"Weren't you punched by a southern girl a few days ago?"

Ai Fa poked my shoulder like an angry cat.

Whenever we talked about Dell, Ai Fa would get upset.

"...You two are really close, Ai Fa and Asuta..."

Vena Wu muttered softly.

Ai Fa suppressed her anger and then turned towards her:

"You seem listless. Does your foot still hurt, eldest daughter of the Wu clan?"

"I'm fine... My heart just aches when I see both of you acting lovey-dovey..."

I was shocked by her words.

However, Ai Fa just tilted her head puzzledly:

"Doesn't the Wu clan have many family members? Why would you feel that way?"

"Are you serious...? I really can't deal with you..."

A giant question mark appeared on top of Ai Fa's head.

Vena Wu looked weakly at Ai Fa from the corner of her eyes and sighed.

“Don’t mind me... It’s my own problem...”

Ai Fa nodded and replied: “Is that so?”

She then continued with a rarely seen troubled expression:

“Grandma Jiba and Rimee Wu are in the Wu clan. With these two that I know very well there... I think the Wu clan is a blissful family.”

“I understand... I cherish my family very much too...”

After saying that, Vena Wu covered her face with her long bangs.

I was probably the only one who heard what she said next.

“Just what am I hoping for...”

Vena Wu mumbled uneasily like a child.



Inside the 『Cryptic Venerable Inn』 kitchen, the innkeeper Neil said in a voice devoid of emotions: “Asuta, the contract will end today.”

He was a young keeper less than thirty years of age and medium build. He had ivory skin, as well as brown hair and eyes, a typical westerner.

“Thank you very much for today... I hope to sign a new contract with you tomorrow.”

“I’m honored by your words. However, like I explained just now, I will be switching the dish from tomorrow onwards and won’t be using pickled Chitto.”

I replied as I lay out the ingredients I brought over onto the counter, and Neil said to me: “I’m actually looking forward to your next dish.”

His sincere and friendly words didn’t match his emotionless face. This strange innkeeper had been trying hard to follow the customs of the easterners and didn’t reveal his emotions.

“I have done the seasoning, so I would like you to try the taste. I will be starting then.”

Today's dish was [Chitto hotpot] which was modeled after the kimchi hotpot.

It was a simple dish made by cooking kiba and tino in water and then adding pickled Chitto and Tau sauce. So I was free before the water boiled and could use the free time to make the new dish.

It was the [Kiba sauté- Arrabbiata style] that I asked Ai Fa and Shumimaru to try few days ago. A single portion was easy to make. I asked Vena Wu to watch the fire of the [Chitto hotpot] and then started working on the new dish quietly.

Ai Fa stood guard by the window, Shin Wu stayed at the entrance of the kitchen, and Neil stayed beside me to watch me cook. The kitchen in the 『Cryptic Venerable Inn』 was the smallest of all the inns I had visited, and it felt cramped with five people inside.

When we were guarding against Zattsu Tsun's attack, there were four escorts. Back then, three of them stayed outside to watch the surroundings, the back, and the front door. But there were just two escorts this time, so the two of them concentrate their forces indoors.

Naudiz from the 『Big Tree of the South Inn』 was still a little afraid of the Forest's Edge's denizens, but Neil didn't seem to be so. Engrossed in the Semu culture of the eastern kingdom, he felt sad about the differences and unrest between the four great kingdoms. The denizens of Forest's Edge abandoned Jaguar and became citizens of Selva, so they were discriminated for their background. But he tried his best to treat the denizens of Forest's Edge fairly and equally with no regards for all that.

He didn't have the resolve to change his faith or make others change theirs, so he didn't take an easterner as his wife. That's what he said.

As expected, changing one's faith in this world was a taboo.

The side that was abandoned would be unhappy, and the other side wouldn't welcome him either. That was the reason why the denizens of Forest's Edge were poorly received by the people in Genos.

What is the rationale behind this thinking? Do they think people who change faith can't be trusted?

I heard that Kamyua Yost was a mixed blood of the north and west kingdom. His childhood was spent in the northern kingdom, and he moved to the western kingdom

after his mother died.

Why would someone like Kamyua Yost be born between the enemy nations of Mahildra and Selva? I didn't ask him the reason, but I knew he lived as a northerner with his mother in the past, and changed his faith to the one of westerners after his mother's death. His strange experience had to be the key to molding his weird personality.

Kamyua once said he couldn't find a proper job because of his heritage and that's why he became a guardian. He felt a one-sided sense of camaraderie towards the denizens of Forest's Edge who had similar experience as him.

Changing one's religion wasn't an easy decision for both Kamyua Yost and the denizens of Forest's Edge, but they weren't accepted by the western kingdom of Selva.

In that sense, converting one's faith for the sake of marriage won't bring them happiness.

I glanced at Vena Wu, who was standing silently beside the stove, and sighed quietly.

After the meat and aria were cooked, I poured the tarapa sauce I prepared into the pot.

"Is that the tarapa sauce you use at your stall?"

"Yes, it meshes really well with Chitto."

"I see. I often add myam to Chitto, but tarapa is a surprise to me."

"It would be too sour to add tarapa directly. It won't taste too bad either way, but I recommend adding in diced aria to make it sweeter."

The cooking was done as I was explaining to Neil.

The [Kiba sauté- Arrabbiata style] was done.

"Please have a taste. I think this is as good as Chitto kiba."

Neil picked up the spoon with a serious face.

He then bit into the loin meat covered in red sauce... and then covered his mouth with

an “Ahh.”

“W-What is it?”

“I can’t... stop myself from smiling.”

“That makes me glad.”

I couldn’t help grinning.

There weren’t any Semu nearby, so there shouldn’t be any problem with showing his emotions.

“This is too shameful. Ah... It tastes really good.”

Neil twitched the corner of his lips worriedly as he ate the entire dish. He managed to keep a straight face, but his hasty way of eating showed how satisfied he was.

“Yes, the taste is impeccable. It will definitely be as popular as the previous menu.”

Neil put the plate he cleaned out back on the counter while saying that.

He then looked at me with his light brown eyes a little worryingly.

“But there is only one dish...? I requested for the dish to be alternated every day because I couldn’t choose between the two dishes you presented...”

“Yes, it’s a rare chance, so I was thinking of preparing two dishes too. But the new soup dish I’m researching still isn’t ready.”

I made Arrabbiata style soup with the same method too... But, compared to the vegetable stew I made before, I felt something was missing in this soup.

The main ingredient of grilled meat was the meat. The tarapa and Chitto meshed perfectly as a sauce that brought out the taste. But when they were made into soup, something seemed to be missing. Just kiba stock, tarapa sauce, and Tau sauce alone weren’t enough to complement the spiciness of the Chitto.

“Erm, you make the pickled Chitto by marinating it with salted maru, correct? So there is seafood inside, and its taste plays a huge part in making Chitto hotpot”

This wasn't common sense, but the conclusion I came to from my memory of eating kimchi hotpot and Italian cuisine.

Even if it wasn't seafood, adding Consommé or Bouillon would work too... In short, I felt troubled by the absence of the taste of 'stock'.

For example, I could get thick stock by boiling kiba bones and use them. I could also cook several vegetables into vegetable stew too.

But that would take a lot of time and effort, and the ingredients would cost a lot too. The time limit was an hour, and the price would be two red copper plates for one dish. It was unrealistic to cook it that way under such constraints.

"Your soup is popular with my customers. They will complain if there isn't any soup dish to replace it."

Neil looked at me with sincere eyes and continued:

"Asuta, I have no complaints about the meat dish earlier. Can you alternate between this meat dish and the pickled Chitto soup?"

"Ahh, well... To be frank, I need to review the cost price."

"Cost price? But why?"

"You see, the Forest's Edge settlement has adjusted the selling price of fresh kiba meat. It was too cheap in the past, so it has been increased to a reasonable amount. But it is still cheaper than karon meat."

When he heard my answer, Neil nodded quietly:

"That's true. When I heard that you wanted to use pickled Chitto in your dish, I was worried whether you would be able to make any profit at all. Asuta, can you tell me how much are your profits now...? I won't pry if you are not comfortable with sharing."

"It's fine. Right now... I earn nine red copper plates for every 30 portions of Chitto hotpot."

It might sound staggering, but the price of the kiba I bought from the other houses increased by 85 percent. Neil also widened his eyes in surprise.

“60 red copper plates worth of cooking make you a profit of nine red copper plates?”

“Yes. When the meat was cheap, I could earn 30 red copper plates. I don’t really mind this, but I’m still running a business here.”

But the one who caused the price to increase was myself. This situation was a result of me relying too much on the cheap fresh meat.

On top of that, I was busy with work back then and didn’t have time to research my cooking. My only choice back then was to create this dish by taking inspiration from the kimchi hotpot and kimchi pork.

“But I know that now. I will continue to research my cooking, and before I come up with a new dish that you find satisfactory, I will continue supplying Chitto hotpot like before.”

“But Asuta, your profits will...”

“If the customers become unhappy because of this matter and it leaves a bad impression of kiba dish on them, that would be similar to putting the cart before the horse. I think this is the best choice right now. I just need to do my best and present a dish that others will like.”

I then added:

“However, the high cost of the Chitto hotpot is due to me buying pickled Chitto from Neil and using it in my cooking. If Neil makes and sells the Chitto hotpot, you can make a substantial profit, correct?”

By the way, Neil should be selling the kiba dishes to his customers at a profitable price now. If he took part in the cooking process, he could add the profit I was making on top of his current profits.

But Neil lowered his gaze sadly and shook his head.

“I’m confident of my culinary skills too, but I’m not sure that I can cook a dish as delicious as Asuta. If my cooking isn’t as good as Asuta, it will just make the customer’s unhappy.”

“Is that so... that’s a shame.”

“But Asuta, does that mean I can buy kiba from you?”

“Huh? Yes, of course.”

My heart skipped a beat.

Neil’s eyes of regret were suddenly filled with lights of expectations.

“Then I want to buy some kiba. Making the same dishes as Asuta will make my flaws more prominent, so I want to cook something original for my customers.”

Neil smiled after saying that:

“And I want to eat kiba too. Why should I serve it to my customers and only eat kimyusu and karon meat myself? I have been thinking about that recently...”

“Will you really buy kiba?”

“Yes, although I won’t be buying too much... it won’t be more expensive than karon meat, right?”

“O-Okay! Right now, I’m benchmarking the price against the karon meat sold in town. When this business gets on track, we might review the price again...”

“I’m really lucky to buy kiba while it is still cheap then.”

Neil made a gang sign with his fingers.

It was the gang sign the Semu people often made.

“Please sell me fresh kiba meat. I would like ten portions every day for now.”

Ten portions in the inn were about 2.5 kg.

The price was equivalent to karon meat, so there was a profit of ten red copper plates.

But there was finally someone who was willing to procure fresh kiba meat. I looked back at Ai Fa unconsciously.

Ai Fa remained expressionless, but she squinted her eyes happily as she looked back

at me.

“Thank you very much, Neil. I’m really, really grateful.”

“I’m glad too. The flavor of the kiba is different from kimyusu and karon meat, and more people will like it with each passing day.”

After saying that, Neil suddenly said: “Excuse me.” and turned around.

He disappeared into the food store and then returned a moment later with a jar and a large cloth bundle.

“This is the salted maru used to make pickled Chitto.”

Neil said as he placed the jar on the counter and opened the lid.

I looked inside curiously and found it half-filled with small white translucent objects.

I couldn’t really tell the shapes. It was thin and about 1 cm in length, and was something like dried and salted krill.

“This can be caught in the western territories and isn’t a rare ingredient. Shops that sell myam and rock salt will basically sell this too. One jar costs around two red copper plates.”

“I see! So this is actually a snack that goes along with wine.”

This was like the equivalent of pepper squid. It probably wasn’t suited to be mixed with tarapa sauce directly. A precious marine ingredient that could be eaten in Genos which wasn’t near the ocean.

“Thank you very much. I plan to buy some today and see what food I can cook with it. And this bundle is...?”

“This is curd. A caravan from Semu came this morning, and I bought some as promised.”

“Ah, it’s cheese! And a lot of it too.”

“Yes, I bought five pieces. I will let you have this one, Asuta.”

The Wu clan wanted to buy some too. This one was about 400 to 500 g so I could split it cleanly in half.

I turned to glance at Ai Fa, and she suppressed a smile on her lips and glared at me.

Ai Fa really liked hamburg steak with Camembert-like cheese on top. Even though Ai Fa wasn't a Semu, I was fine with it as long as she was happy.

"Thank you very much! The piece I bought previously is almost finished, this is a big help."

"I'm glad that you like them... You must be even happier about selling fresh kiba, Asuta."

Neil said with a hint of a smile on his lips.

"Asuta who is a denizen of Forest's Edge likes Semu curd; I'm a westerner and love kiba. This might be a trivial conversation in an indistinct shop, but I think it is very meaningful. Please maintain a cordial relationship with me in the future too, Asuta."

Part 3

After finishing the job at the 『Cryptic Venerable Inn』, we headed to the 『Big Tree of the South Inn』 next.

The 『Cryptic Venerable Inn』 was located rather far from the stone-paved street and was in the middle of the residential zone. So we had to make our way through a narrow alley.

Not much time had passed since noon. Most of the people were working in the shops along the street or in the fields to the south, so there weren't many pedestrians.

I shouldn't act too excited in front of the moody Vena Wu, but I couldn't help whispering to Ai Fa: "We got plenty of great news today. The new dish was well received, we bought cheese, and someone is willing to buy fresh kiba. This is perfect."

"That's great. But you still need to make another dish to be sold at that inn, correct?"

"Yes, but we have Gilulu now, so the journey to and fro Post Station Town is shortened. I can delegate the preparation jobs to Leina Wu and the others, so I have more time now. I will figure something out."

"...You will just keep feeding me dishes made from that red berry though."

"No, like I said, Ai Fa's portion will be less spicy."

"I'm a little peeved that you did that."

Ai Fa pouted from an angle that Shin Wu and the others couldn't see.

"Don't pout. I will make you some hamburg steak with cheese for taste testing too."

"...You think that will make me happy?"

"Ah, you look blissful when eating hamburg steak."

I was kicked.

I need to restrain myself from going overboard.

Anyway, Neil is not an ordinary person. He lives in the western kingdom, but his mindset is closer to the people from the east. Not many people will accept kiba that easily though.

But this was still a meaningful step.

Naudiz from the 『Big Tree of the South Inn』 might be thinking about cooking kiba himself, and I had a chance to work with the 『West Wind Inn』 too. If I could convince Milano Mast, I would be able to sell kiba dishes in the 『Kimyusu's Tail Inn』.

Things felt stagnant just a few days ago, but there had been so much progress in just one day. It was at times like this that I needed to be cautious and take things slow and steady... With that in mind, my strides turned lighter.

This is the fourth day of the fourth contract; there are still six days before the contract is up. Why don't I rest for two days to research my cooking?

I could only think about all this after on a day off after twenty odd days. Was I a workaholic?

I thought quietly when Ai Fa suddenly grabbed my right arm. Vena Wu and the others behind us also stopped because of that.

Before I could ask her the reason, someone appeared on the path we were heading down.

"Asuta, what coincidence. What you do in a place like this?"

He spoke Western a little awkwardly.

That person pulled back his hood, showing his long brown hair and a smiling dark face. He was Sangjura who visited our stall yesterday.

"Ah, hello. What a coincidence, we are heading back after finishing our work."

"Work, place like this?"

Sangjura approached us slowly.

Ai Fa was very wary for some reason, but Sanjura was smiling gently like yesterday.

“That’s right. I’m actually catering for an inn. I still need to rush to another inn later.”

“Inn. Could it be... 『Cryptic Venerable Inn』?”

“Huh? Yes, it’s the 『Cryptic Venerable Inn』.”

“As I suspect. That inn, serve kiba dishes.”

He continued smiling as he squinted his light colored eyes.

What a charming smile.

“Ah, are you lodging in the 『Cryptic Venerable Inn』, Sangjura?”

“Yes. I born in west but like eastern cuisine. So I always choose, inn catered for easterners.”

Aside from how he didn’t conceal his emotions, Sangjura looked just like a Semu. It was only natural for him to lodge in 『Cryptic Venerable Inn』.

A mixed-blood between the east and the west, huh. He probably has a complicated family history too.

I wasn’t that wary of Sangjura, but there was a strange air about him. He felt a little unnatural... and was similar to Shumimaru’s charm and Kamyua Yost’s suspiciousness in a sense. I was drawn to him for some reason.

Maybe it’s because he shows his emotions despite being a Semu.

In any case, I felt good will towards him.

So I bid him farewell with a smile:

“Alright then, I still have work to attend to, may we meet again...”

“Wait. Don’t move, Asuta”

Ai Fa pulled my arm again.

I turned back and was shocked. The rage of a hunter was burning in Ai Fa’s blue eyes.

“W-What’s the matter? He didn’t do anything, right?!”

“It has nothing to do with this man. Someone is watching us.”

Ai Fa said in a soft voice.

“It’s different from yesterday, this gaze is like poison needles. There isn’t anyone around here; I might be able to trace it back. Pretend to know nothing and don’t panic.”

I swept the place with my eyes.

There weren’t signs of anyone else here, much less a presence.

Sangjura tilted his head a quizzingly.

“What is it? I, don’t sense anything.”

After saying crudely: “Sorry, please don’t talk for now.”, Ai Fa looked at Shin Wu.

Shin Wu nodded and walked calmly to Ai Fa’s side.

“How is it? Did you notice?”

“Yes, faintly. But... this feels like a hunter who is masking his presence.”

“Yes. The townsfolk can’t hide themselves so well... Anyway, the presence is ahead of us, to the right.”

Ai Fa glanced at Sangjura and then whispered to Shin Wu:

“I want to stay here to protect Asuta and the eldest daughter of the Wu clan. Can you go if we find the source? It might be a little dangerous.”

“Understood. To the right... in front of us. Correct? Isn’t that between those two houses?”

“Maybe. Let’s walk on ahead slowly.”

Ai Fa looked towards Sangjura after saying that.

“Easterner... I have a favor to ask.”

“Okay, do what?”

“I hope you can leave immediately, if you have nothing to do with the presence over there.”

Sangjura furrowed his brows puzzledly.

“I don’t understand. But Asuta, you have job later? Then, I go.”

“Yes, sorry about that. I hope you won’t mind.”

I couldn’t grasp the situation myself, so I just apologized vaguely.

Sangjura showed me a refreshing smile before putting on his hood again.

“Tomorrow, I go your stall. I eat Asuta food just now.”

“Ah, is that so? Thank you for your patronage.”

“You welcome. Tomorrow I come early.”

Sangjura made a conscious effort to not go near Ai Fa, as he headed down the way we came from— towards the 『Cryptic Venerable Inn』 .

“Alright, let’s go. Asuta and eldest daughter of the Wu clan, continue walking and pretend to not know anything, and slowly go around to my left. Just walk down to the fork road there. Don’t do anything unnatural.”

Ai Fa half closed her hunter’s eyes and led the way.

Aside from her dangerous gaze, her movements were no different from usual.

Was someone really watching us?

Just what is going on here? Things have been strange since yesterday’s morning. If Pyschkurewuss is involved, his men should only be making their moves after the conference...

My heart started to race.

I moved my legs that were growing stiff and slowly drifted towards Ai Fa's left.

We were less than 5 meters from the road leading to the right. When I noticed, Shin Wu was already on Ai Fa's right, while Vena Wu was right behind me.

The place was still barren. We will reach the streets in a few more minutes, and the surroundings were still as quiet as a ghost town.

This wasn't a well-to-do residential area. The closely packed houses were built mostly with wood, which wasn't too different from the Forest's Edge settlement. When we were almost at the alley between two houses, Shin Wu suddenly jumped.

Someone who was walking normally disappeared suddenly from my sights.

Shin Wu dashed into the depths of the alley, with his hunter's cape fluttering behind him.

I yelled "Ahh!" on reflex.

A pebble flew towards Shin Wu from the shadow of a house.

But Shin Wu continued to run at the same speed after tilting his head to evade that attack.

Ai Fa pulled out her saber with a flash to deflect the pebble flying our way.

At the same time, a petite figure jumped out from the shadow of the house.

The figure sprinted down the road with his back to Shin Wu.

It was a child-like figure that was wearing a leather cape that differed from a kiba cape.

"Wait!"

Shin Wu shouted as he grabbed the shoulders of that mysterious person.

In that instant, Shin Wu's body suddenly flew up into the air.

I couldn't tell what happened.

When I realized it, Shin Wu's body had spun in the air and fell down with his back to the ground.

Shin Wu groaned and the assailant turned towards us.

An unfamiliar face.

He wore his hood deep like a Semu.

His stature was short, shorter than Ai Fa and Shin Wu.

Under his yellow leopard-spotted cape were plain clothes.

His skin color... was ivory? He looked tanned and a little dirty, so I wasn't sure. However, he definitely wasn't a Semu or a Jaguar.

The small assailant looked at the groaning Shin Wu on the ground and us who were standing 5 to 6 meters away.

He then slowly reached for the weapon by his waist.

On his child-like and girlish waist was a crescent-shaped scimitar.

"Stop!"

Ai Fa roared shrilly.

"You can't draw your blade in town! Why are you targeting us!?"

Ai Fa yelled as she braced her sheathed blade.

She then said quietly to us with her eyes locked onto the assailant: "Stay behind me."

The assailant held the hilt of the scimitar as he stared at us.

Shin Wu struggled to get up beside his feet.

The assailant then kicked Shin Wu's face.

Blood splattered, and Shin Wu collapsed again.

“I told you to stop! You dare lay your hands on a denizen of Forest’s Edge? I will be your opponent!”

That wasn’t something I expected Ai Fa to say.

But Ai Fa probably thought that she couldn’t save Shin Wu if she didn’t say that much. With this distance, no matter how fast Ai Fa was, she couldn’t beat the swing of the assailant’s blade.

The assailant swayed his head a little hesitantly.

Should he turn and run, or stab the enemy by his feet to take down one enemy? That was probably what he was thinking about.

After a short silence in this dangerous atmosphere, the assailant made the third choice.

He charged towards Ai Fa.

“Get down!”

After shouting at us, Ai Fa ducked down.

The assailant covered several meters in an instant, drew his scimitar, and leapt with a yell... and then swung his blade towards Ai Fa.

But their blades didn’t touch the other parties’ body.

A second before they would collide, the assailant vanished.

I couldn’t understand what was happening before me.

In the place of the petite assailant who disappeared was a tall cloaked man.

He was wielding a sheathed blade just like Ai Fa and was facing diagonally from us. It was Sangjura.

“Butting in, sorry. I was worried, so I came back.”

He said calmly with the sheathed blade in his left hand, as he straightened his slightly crouching body.

“Hurt, are you? Probably, safe now.”

I sighed in relief and looked to my left.

Ai Fa was already looking my way.

The assailant who got attacked from the flank by Sangjura held his left shoulder as he rolled on the ground.

Sangjura took three steps forwards and stepped on the scimitar rolling on the ground.

Ai Fa continued bracing her blade warily and said softly: “...Thank you for your help.”

Sangjura looked at the assailant who was writhing in pain and said with a smile: “You are welcome.”

“Maintain peace, responsibility of townsfolk. Hand him, to guards.”

Sangjura then flicked his sword.

The tip of the sheath hooked the hood of the assailant, revealing his face.

Bright red filled our sights.

The assailant’s hair was as red as Lala Wu’s.

Sangjura said quietly: “Please, no struggle. Bandit, are you?”

The assailant who was lying prone got up with his hand on his left shoulder.

“Don’t be absurd! You are calling me a bandit!?”

His voice sounded more childlike than I expected.

But his face was scary.

His messy flame-like hair hung over his cheeks, and yellowish feral light shone out

from his bangs.

His brows were furrowed from rage, and he bared his fangs like a carnivorous feline. I couldn't imagine how he actually looked because of how twisted his face was from rage.

"Damn Semu... If you dare treat me like a bandit, I will kill you..."

"Drawing blade in town, attacking innocent townsfolk. If not bandit, then what?"

Sangjura replied to the youth calmly... then observed this assailant who was a far cry from being calm.

"But your attire... Instead of bandit, like Marsala hunter."

Ai Fa commented quietly: "Hunter?"

The enraged youth glared at Ai Fa.

"Filthy denizens of Forest's Edge... I will never forgive you."

"What are you talking about. If you have any grudge, let me hear it. If you bare your blade at me, I can only respond in kind."

The youth swung his right arm and yelled: "Shut up!"

A silver flash cut through the air. Ai Fa and Sangjura parried his thrown daggers at the same time with their sheaths.

The daggers fell harmlessly by their feet.

Their reaction was incredibly fast.

However, the youth achieved his goal.

Sangjura left a gap when he adjusted his posture to swing his blade, and that youth snatched the scimitar from under his feet.

That youth was as nimble as a beast.

“I will definitely get my revenge! I swear on my name of Geta, son of Red Beard Goram!”

“What?”

The youth had already turned and left when Ai Fa said that.

The next moment Sangjura who wanted to give chase kept his sheathed sword with a sigh.

“Fast, he run. I can’t catch.”

Ai Fa clicked her tongue and kept her sheathed blade too.

She could probably catch up, but she couldn’t just leave us behind. That youth in a leopard-patterned cape disappeared between the buildings in no time.

“Red beard Goram... Ai Fa, isn’t that the bandit boss that was mentioned yesterday?”

The boss of the “Red Beard Gang”, Goram... Kamyua Yost talked about him before.

In order to find his significant other and child, Kamyua left Genos together with a few hunters of Forest’s Edge.

“What’s going on here? Did Kamyua just miss them? W-What should we do now...”

“Don’t get flustered. Tend to Shin Wu’s injury first.”

Ai Fa glared at me.

“So is bandit after all. Broad daylight, in town. Rare.”

Sangjura smiled leisurely.

He wasn’t fazed at all; I felt the need to change my first impression of him being the type to not get into trouble.

“But I feel, his shoulder blade, fracture. In short time, won’t do crime. Best, leave to guards.”

“...Yes, thank you.”

I answered with a sigh. We couldn't hand him over to the guards.

Kamyua Yost was searching for the wife and child of Red Beard Goram, they were important witnesses. And the town patrol in the Post Station Town seemed to be members of the Towns Guards commanded by Pyschkurewuss' brother. We had to find that youth before the guards did.

He can't forgive the denizens of Forest's Edge because his father was executed on trumped up charges? Then... the only option is to clear up the truth.

If that youth still hates the denizens of Forest's Edge... it would be troubling.

I suppressed my urge to sigh over this complicated matter.

This was definitely a trial the Forest's Edge had to go through. The wrongdoings of Zattsu Tsun, and the denizens who didn't stop him. Not all the townsfolk thought that the slate was wiped clean when Zattsu Tsun was executed.

A child younger than me, huh; he actually hates us so much... This isn't normal.

Please appear before us again. Please have a talk with the new tribal chiefs... I murmured in my heart as I looked at the street where the red-haired youth fled.

Part 4

“Shin Wu! What happened to you!”

After finishing our work, we linked up with the group that stayed with the stall. Lala Wu rushed to the pale-faced Shin Wu immediately.

Shin Wu had a bruise under his right eye and his lips were chapped and bleeding. He answered expressionlessly: “I was careless.”

“What do you mean by careless!? Were you assaulted!?”

“Don’t be so loud. You will frighten the town folks.”

Shin Wu remained calm.

Lala Wu leaned onto Shin Wu’s chest and glared at Ai Fa.

“How did Shin Wu get wounded even with Ai Fa around!? Isn’t Ai Fa able to deal easily with any opponents!?”

“That’s enough. Ai Fa performed her task. I failed at mine, so it’s my incompetence at fault; Ai Fa is not to be blamed.”

Ai Fa remained silent.

Ai Fa was probably wary of Sangjura, that’s why she didn’t leave Vena Wu and me alone.

But if she said that, it would be as good as saying Shin Wu wasn’t capable of stopping Sangjura. So Ai Fa didn’t say anything until the end

Shin Wu glanced at Ai Fa and then grabbed Lala Wu’s shoulders.

“Tis but a scratch. I will continue to train so I can do my job properly.”

“But...!”

“Annoying. What’s the use of talking about all that? Instead of getting mad, won’t you be cuter if you cry?”

“You are the annoying one!”

Lala Wu turned towards Ludo Wu, with watery eyes.

“What, so you really are crying. Well... Shin Wu didn’t do too great just now too. At a time like this, you should tell her that you’re sorry for making her worry and then give her a hug.”

Shin Wu didn’t say anything and started to blush.

And, of course, Lala Wu’s face started turning red, and her mouth started gaping because she was too angry.

Ludo Wu started giggling and then showed a sharp gaze in his eyes.

“It’s fine, Asuta and Vena-nee are still alive and kicking. Something must have happened for Shin Wu to become like this. Let’s discuss the details on the way back, Ai Fa.”

“Yes, I don’t want others to hear us.”

“Okay, let’s hurry back to Forest’s Edge...”

Before Ludo Wu could finish, a group of cloak men walked over.

And, of course, they were the Silver Vase.

The person walking at their fore stood before me and Vena Wu and pulled back his hood. Vena Wu almost averted her face, but steeled herself and glared at them with angry eyes instead.

“Asuta, Vena Wu, late I am, sorry. Bid farewell, I come.”

“Thank you, Shumimaru. I’m glad to have met you.”

My feelings were a mixture of anxiousness and relief, but I still answered him with a smile.

Ludo Wu scratched his blonde hair and said: “Ahh, I forgot about you guys.”

“What a hectic day. But... If we stay here, people might call the guards on us?”

Things weren't that serious, but we were already very prominent. Nine denizens of Forest's Edge, ten easterners, two Totos and a wagon, a massive group. Even though the stone-paved road was ten meters wide, we were still obstructing normal traffic.

“Why don't we go around the back of that building? The road leading back to Forest's Edge has an open space nearby.”

Everyone accepted my proposal unquestioningly and then started moving.

I took the reins from Shela Wu and then headed south along the street.

Shela Wu who had just moved to the back took out something from the wagon and came to me again:

“Asuta, I handed the jerky to the southerners. The remunerations are safekept together with the earnings from the stall.”

“Ahh, thank you. Erm... The special jerky I prepared...”

“They accepted it happily.”

Shela Wu smiled brightly... and showed a brilliant smile.

“Their leader Balan told me to hold on to this.”

“Huh? What is it...?”

“It looks like fruit wine. Seems to be expensive.”

Shela Wu opened the bundle, and there was a rarely seen bottle in it.

It wasn't the fruit wine that the denizens of Forest's Edge frequently bought for one red copper plate. These two were like the bottle Kamuyua Yost gifted me in the past and contained smooth and high-quality wine.

“They said... gifting something like this isn't a custom in Genos or Jaguar. But since Asuta gave them a present too, they will call it even.”

The image of Pops Balan's angry yelling face appeared before my eyes.

"He also said that he will come back to Genos after a year at most and to not get into any trouble."

"...I understand, thank you."

Shela Wu nodded and then went to the back to keep the fruit wine.

Ai Fa then leaned in.

"Asuta, are you crying?"

"Who's crying, stupid!"

I was careless and answered her a little too loudly. Ai Fa pouted and said: "Why did you call me stupid?"

I apologized and then cast my gaze towards Shumimaru who was walking diagonally ahead of me.

I will be bidding farewell to Pops Balan, Arudas, and Shumimaru today. The emotions in my heart started to well up.

Who's crying, stupid...

I didn't even know myself who I was calling stupid, and just walked along in a daze.

We followed the stone-paved path southwards, passed through an alley between two inns, and our field of vision suddenly opened up.

It was a vast empty space. On the opposite side was the looming forest.

Buildings to our back and forest to our front. There was a small worn path leading into right into the Forest's Edge in the woods.

This was the border between the forest and the Post Station Town.

Which was also the place where the people opposing and supporting our business gathered.

Our two groups faced each other here.

The denizens of Forest's Edge stood with their backs to the forest, and the easterners had the town behind them. We stood in two rows representing different camps.

"Thank you, let us taste, delicious food."

Shumimaru made a gang sign and bowed.

The people standing on either side of him also pulled their hoods back.

The only faces I recognized belonged to Shumimaru, the deputy band leader Radajiddo who visited this afternoon, and a young man whose name I didn't know.

I think he was the one standing at the left edge of the row.

After trying a [Kiba burger] sample, he called his brethrens from the caravan over. For my stall, he was the second patron after Tara.

Shumimaru's first visit of my stall was on the next day.

When the Pops was hollering that this meat tasted nasty and was inedible, the Silver Vase visited my stall. Pops' mates also came over, causing quite a scene.

That was a month ago.

And now, Shumimaru walked up to me.

Ai Fa was between Vena Wu and me.

But Shumimaru stood before me.

"Asuta, farewell, late, sorry."

"No, it's fine..."

"Entire day, in city."

"Huh?"

“Collect information, about Pyschkurewuss. Investigate, truth, of rumors.”

I was surprised beyond words.

Shumimaru squinted apologetically.

“Butt in, sorry. But help Asuta, I want. How dangerous Pyschkurewuss is, want know... But, truth, no find.”

“But... But why, Shumimaru...?”

“But someone who knows truth, I meet. Help Asuta, that person can. One day, visit [[Cryptic Venerable Inn]] , he will.”

A person who knew whether the rumors about Pyschkurewuss were true.

However, the rumors Shumimaru heard were probably not directly related to the denizens of Forest’s Edge.

But that didn’t matter anymore. I was just happy that Shumimaru was so worried about me... as well as angry.

“Shumimaru, why did you do something so dangerous? Aren’t you the one who told me not to go near Pyschkurewuss, Shumimaru?”

“Why Asuta angry, I understand. But help you, I want.”

Shumimaru lowered his gaze depressedly.

“Sorry, restrain myself, I can’t.”

I couldn’t bear a grudge against him after seeing how sad his eyes were.

“I never expect Shumimaru to be so reckless. Even though he looked so steady and calm.”

“Yes. Brethren, say often.”

Contrary to how Shumimaru looked, he was very enthusiastic about chatting.

I smiled even though I felt like crying.

“...But, I’m happy that you are so worried about me. Thank you.”

“Welcome. That man... Michael of Turan, be of help, definitely.”

One of the members of Silver Vase who were listening to us quietly walked up to us slowly.

“Meet that man, you need, denizen of Forest’s Edge. Stars, last night, I read.”

He was an elderly Semu.

His stature was tall, but his dark face was filled with deep wrinkles, and his neck and arms were covered in veins. He had serene eyes, the kind I imagine Shumimaru would have when he gets old.

“Denizens of Forest’s Edge, gain power when meet him. And denizens of Forest’s Edge, own path, will find.”

He was the Semu astrologist.

This was the astrologist who prophesied that the malefic star Zattsu Tsun would fade... He even said that he couldn’t read my star.

I felt my back stiffened.

The elderly man kept his face emotionless, and after looking at me for a while, he shifted his gaze towards Ai Fa.

“You are... star of the cat.”

“What?”

“Malefic star gone, Forest’s Edge, fate, change, revolution. Three-headed lion awaken, lead, Forest’s Edge, future. Star of three-headed lion, flanked by, star of cat, star of monkey, star of hawk. Future, shining brighter.”

“Sorry, I don’t understand you at all. What’s a cat?”

“Forest’s Edge, no cats? Eastern kingdom, have. Animal, sacred. ”

I thought she was a cat-like woman too.

I shifted my gaze back onto Shumimaru.

“...I understand. I will trust Shumimaru’s judgment. If Micheal of Turan shows up, I will speak with him.”

“Yes, help you, he will.”

Shumimaru sighed in relief.

He then showed the right hand that was behind his cloak.

His smooth and dark arms were holding a beautiful bundle.

“Gift, I have, for Asuta.”

“Oh, what is it?”

“Wineglass.”

I tilted my head and opened the bundle.

Inside was a couple of simple transparent cups... the beautiful wine glasses I saw at the Silver Vase’s shop some time ago.

The wine glasses came in a pair.

“Ai Fa, it’s for you...”

I turned back and said.

Ai Fa also widened her eyes in surprise.

“Blessing for meeting Asuta, I want give. What to give, I no know... Radajiddo tell, Ai Fa, Asuta, this wine glass, curiously looked.”

That was over twenty days ago. Ai Fa and I visited the Silver Vase’s shop in order to

buy the Semu kitchen knife and the necklace that could ward off misfortune.

Speaking of which, a very tall easterner tended to their shop when Shumimaru wasn't around.

"Accept please. Thanks, for Fa house dinner."

With an unhappy gaze in her eyes, Ai Fa said formally: "...This is too expensive as a return gift for treating you to a meal."

Shumimaru looked at Ai Fa calmly.

"Price, no matter. Gift make Asuta and Ai Fa happy, I want. If you happy with rock, I also give rock. Price, no matter."

"I can't beat a cunning linguist like you after all."

Ai Fa replied, and I felt really hyped up.

I turned to the wagon to fetch my gift for them, and Shela Wu was already handing me that bundle.

I thanked Shela Wu and then handed it to Shumimaru.

"Shumimaru, this is a gift from the Fa house for the 'Silver Vase'. It is jerky made with a special method; please consume within seven days. It's more tender compared to normal jerky and can be eaten without any preparation."

Shumimaru squinted happily and accepted the bundle with thanks.

His gaze alone was a good enough answer for me.

The nine Semy behind him also lowered their heads.

Shumimaru handed the bundle to his companion... then stood before Vena Wu.

"...Vena Wu, much sorry, for two days ago, sudden visit."

Vena Wu looked at Shumimaru wordlessly.

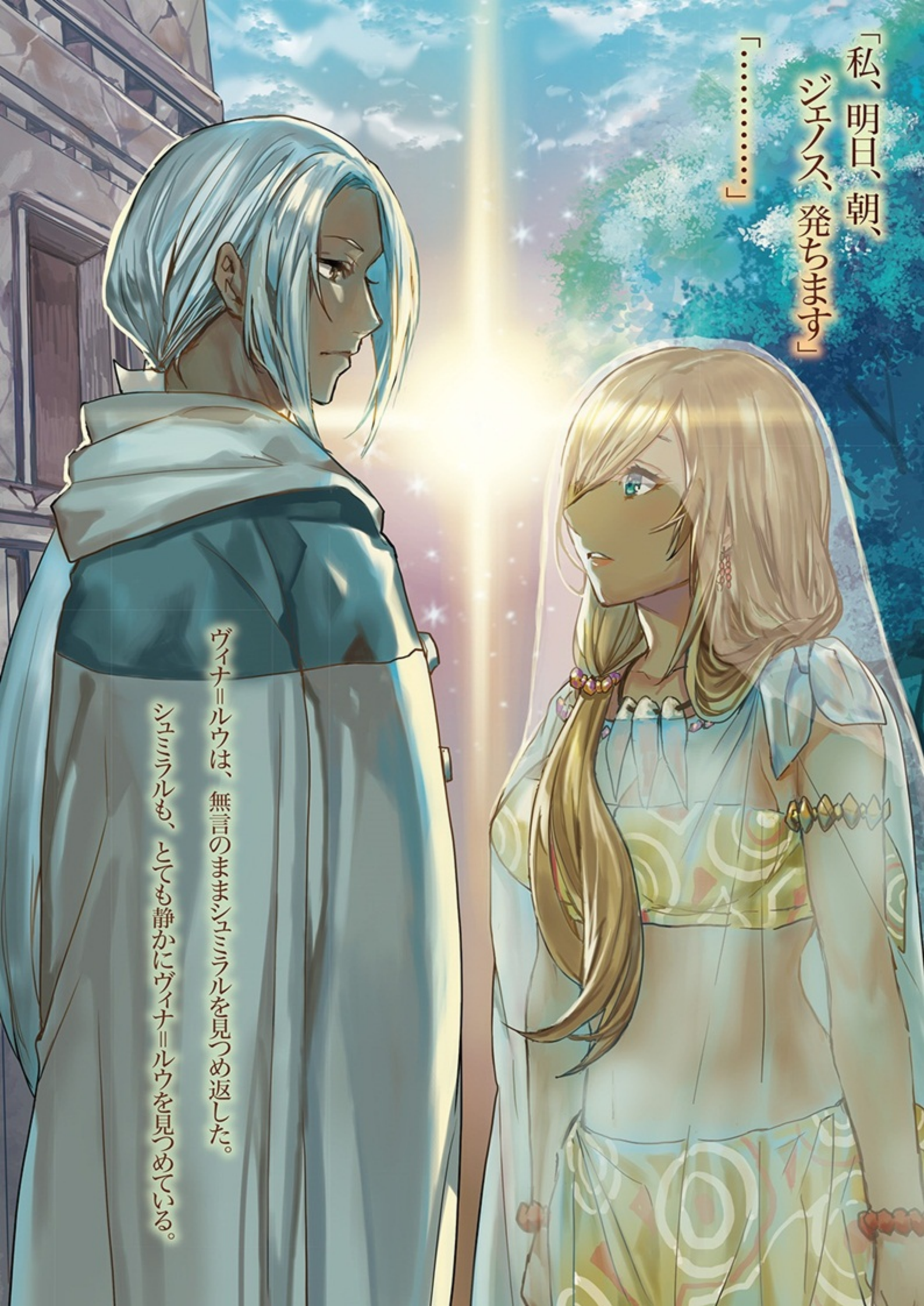
Shumimaru looked at Vena Wu with a peaceful face too.

「私、明日、朝、
ジェノス、発ちます」

「.....」

ヴィナールウは、無言のままシュミラルを見つめ返した。

シュミラルも、とても静かにヴィナールウを見つめている。



“Leave Genos, I, tomorrow.”

“...”

“Half year, back, Genos. Work Genos, one month, back, Semu. That, ‘Silver Vase’, way of life.”

“...”

“Then, half year, rest home. Then, one year, journey. Continue, until old, can’t travel. Journey, we love. Plainsmen, we are, life is journey.”

Vena Wu muttered softly: “...You spend more time traveling than at home... I think that’s a nice way of living too... I yearn for the world outside of Forest’s Edge and am envious of such a life... But, I’m... still a denizen of Forest’s Edge...”

Vena Wu didn’t show any expression on her face.

But that didn’t mean there weren’t any ripples in her heart; she was probably working hard to not show her wavering feelings.

“I can’t abandon my family... The souls of the denizens of Forest’s Edge must return to the mother forest...”

Shumimaru nodded gently as he gazed into Vena Wu’s eyes.

“Right way to think, that is. But... think two days, I. Make up mind, I did.”

“...”

Shumimaru said with conviction: “I, to Vena Wu, propose marriage.”

Lala Wu and I held our breaths...

Vena Wu shook her head gently.

“Didn’t you hear what I said...?”

“I hear.”

“...You want me to abandon the Forest’s Edge and my family...?”

“No.”

“Then, you want to give up on the traveling you love...?”

“No.”

“Then what do you want...? I don’t understand what you are saying...”

“Give up work in caravan, I can’t. But in Semu, no family. For me, nine brethrens of ‘Silver Vase’, my everything.”

Shumimaru said calmly:

“So, abandon Semu, become denizen of Forest’s Edge, I will. As... denizen of Forest’s Edge, continue work in ‘Silver Vase’.”

Emotions appeared on Vena Wu’s face for the first time.

She looked at Shumimaru with her light colored eyes, as if she was seeing something she couldn’t believe.

“But... Abandoning Semu means disavowing your god... Your companions will no longer be your brethrens...?”

“Yes. But forgive me, everyone did. Continue work, they allow. Work as friend, not brethren.”

“...Things won’t be so easy...”

Vena Wu hugged herself as if she was feeling cold.

Shumimaru looked at Vena Wu calmly as he always did.

“Only, bad thing, two. I, be westerner, ‘Silver Vase’, no go Mahildra. I, no stay Semu. But... brethren say, fine. No brethren, still friend.”

“But...”

“Give up, business in Mahildra. Procure goods, my brethrens, in Semu. Radajiddo... said. Radajiddo, take over, bandleader. I, as westerner, and denizen of Forest’s Edge, work in ‘Silver Vase’.”

“ ... ”

“People from plains, soul, return to plains. I, to Forest’s Edge, offer soul. Give up, plains, my home, painful. But, nine friends, and Vena Wu, I blissful.”

Shumimaru’s voice was as calm as his eyes.

But he tried his best to express himself with his limited grasp of the western language.

“Like I explain, leave home, one year, rest home, half year. But Semu, far. Semu, Genos, come and go, two months each. Aside from journey, away from home, about 8 months. Also, do work Genos, two months. If Genos is home, only leave, for half year. Leave Forest’s Edge, six months, rest of time, I want, be with Vena Wu.”

“But... You can’t hunt kiba, right...?”

“Cannot. But, I travel western kingdom. Get knowledge, all kinds. Get weapons, all kinds. Give Forest’s Edge, hunt kiba, new techniques. What I can do, that is.”

“...My father is the tribal chief of Forest’s Edge, you know...? He will never allow a foreigner to marry into the family...”

“Convince Donda Wu, I will. Make Vena Wu happy, I swear. Half year, when I back Genos, show power, to him.”

Shumimaru took off the accessories on his hand calmly as he spoke.

It was a silver bangle with small pink stones embedded in it.

“Vena Wu, peace be with you. Accept my gift, will you?”

“I...”

She stopped mid-sentence.

After a moment of silence, Vena Wu looked up into Shumimaru’s eyes.

“...I don't know how to interact with an unfathomable person like you...”

Shumimaru tilted his head quizzingly.

And then...

He suddenly smiled:

“Become denizen of Forest's Edge, I work hard, show feelings. Embarrassing. But, necessary, I think.”

He had a pure, warm smile that was just like Sangjura's.

Vena Wu furrowed her brows troublingly.

“I trouble, few days... I trouble, one month. Worry I am, when Vena Wu injured. I know. Vena Wu, I need. Vena Wu, I want to be with.”

“But...”

“Vena Wu, worry for me, I happy. Half year, before I back Genos, can you consider? Half year, if reply, I happy.”

Shumimaru reached out his hands timidly and took Vena Wu's hand.

He put the silver bangle in Vena Wu's hand.

“This half year, I swear, think of Vena Wu, nightly. I love... Vena Wu.”

Vena Wu held that bangle tightly and lowered her head. I couldn't see her facial expressions.

After Shumimaru looked at her one last time, he turned to me again.

He was still smiling gently as usual.

“Well then, back, we go. Next meet, half year after. Asuta, Vena Wu, Ai Fa, Ludo Wu... and friends names I no learn yet, peace be with all you. May Forest's Edge, bright future.”

“Yes, take care... I look forward to seeing you again.”

Shumimaru nodded and turned around.

His brethrens did a simple bow and then turned too.

I silently watched the backs of ten tall and cloaked easterners.

This was goodbye.

No matter how short half a year was, we wouldn't be able to meet again until that time passes.

It had been two months since I came here.

In half a year, I might see them again.

I might meet Pops Balan and company a year later too.

However, it wouldn't be a surprise if I just disappeared for good.

Anyone could die anytime, even me, but I still couldn't break myself free from the feelings of unease.

This could be goodbye for forever.

I wouldn't be able to hear that gentle voice and those warm eyes.

Could I bear witness to Shumimaru and Vena Wu's future?

My chest started hurting as if it was being crushed.

Ai Fa asked: "...Asuta, are you crying?"

I answered: "Who's crying, stupid."

Ai Fa didn't respond.

I hoped she would brush the corners of my eyes gently, but she just ruffled my hair violently.

And so, after meeting all kinds of people, the Green month where I bid farewell to all kinds of people ended.



Mid Meal Snack

~ The Architects from the Southern Kingdom

Asuta of the Fa house is a queer man... Balan thought mindlessly on the wagon pulled by a Totos.

He had finished his work in Genos and was on his way back to Nerva. On the first day of the White month, they set off from Genos first thing in the morning. It was almost noon now. The stone-paved road was smooth, so the wagon didn't shake too much, and his companions yawned a little drowsily.

Balan and company who worked as architects stayed in Genos from the middle of the Green month to the end of the Blue month. It took them one and a half months to finish their work. The buildings in the Genos Post Station Town were mostly Jaguar style, so Balan and company headed to the Post Station Town annually to perform maintenance work.

And they met the strange youth from the Fa house, Asuta, at that place.

He was a madman.

His appearance looked like a normal westerner, with an uncommon combination of dark hair and dark eyes. He had yellowish skin and a normal face and body. Even though he wasn't from this continent, there was no way to prove that. No one would have suspected that he wasn't a homegrown westerner.

So the strange thing about Asuta wasn't his appearance, but what lay inside.

For unknown reasons, Asuta became a denizen of Forest's Edge and opened a business in a stall.

The denizens of Forest's Edge were people who had once betrayed Jaguar.

However, they weren't true Jaguar people in the first place and had secluded themselves in the 'Dark Jungle', shunned by others since ancient times. Terrible man-eating beasts known as black apes dwelled in the Dark Jungle, so sane Jaguar people

never ventured into it.

The Dark Jungle disappeared eight decades ago. No one could be certain, but it seemed to have been burned down during their war with the enemy Semu nation. Balan's hometown was located in the peaceful western side of the country, so he wasn't involved with all this.

Anyway, the denizens of Forest's Edge lost their homes and moved to the Morga Forest's Edge of the western kingdom Selva. They neither started to cultivate the land like real Jaguar people nor engaged the Semu in war; instead, the tribe chose to flee to the remote western kingdom.

Changing one's faith was a serious taboo in this continent. So not just Jaguar, even Selva ostracized the denizens of Forest's Edge.

And of course, Balan was cold towards the denizens of Forest's Edge.

But it wasn't because of what happened in the past, but due to his present feelings.

The denizens of Forest's Edge pissed him off.

Their light tanned skin reminded him of the Semu, and many denizens of Forest's Edge resembled the Semu too. Just like the Semu people, he felt that they couldn't get along with the Jaguar people.

And the denizens of Forest's Edge also avoided others in Genos. They occasionally visited the Post Station Town to sell the tusks and horns of kiba and buy salt and vegetables, but they didn't interact with others. For the Jaguar who thought of forthrightness as a virtue, this was the part that displeased him the most.

The youth named Asuta colluded with this group.

Which was why their first meeting was such a disaster. He felt pissed off right after meeting Asuta, who was peddling food from the symbol of disaster, kiba, with a group of pretty Forest's Edge girls. Such foolishness enraged him. And the kiba he tried had a weird mushy texture, which was hard to accept, contributing to the idea that Asuta's actions were retarded.

In the end, I went out of my way to buy kiba jerky. He must think of me as a laughingstock.

He thought distractedly as he looked at the sack at a corner of the wagon.

Balan was only opposed to kiba in the first few days. After Asuta started selling the new dish made with myam, Balan's stubbornness was shattered.

It was unbelievably delicious.

So good that he couldn't imagine that it was made from the same kiba used in the last dish he tried.

After eating kiba for some time, the unique taste of the kiba grew of him, and Balan even bought kiba jerky.

The meals Asuta catered at the inn were also fantastic.

That dish served in the 『Big Tree of the South Inn』, where Balan was lodging in, was an even bigger shock.

The food made with Tau sauce was so incredibly good that his eyes almost popped out. Tau sauce was a seasoning from Jaguar. He had not eaten something so delicious back at home.

There was scanty any chance to eat such a high-class cuisine in the Genos Post Station Town.

Generally speaking, the food from his hometown Nerva was better. Genos was a prosperous city, and the quality of the fuwano and fruit wine were excellent, and there were plenty of fruits and vegetables too. However, the meat and seasoning were crude.

Only a few inns served food made from Tau sauce while sugar and honey were completely absent. Genos wasn't too far from Jaguar, but all these ingredients were sold in the city, so Balan and company who could only visit the Post Station Town had no chance of eating them.

In contrast, this readily available karon meat that couldn't be found in Jaguar was normal. But it was seasoned with salt and spices since there wasn't any Tau sauce and sugar. The quality of the fuwano and fruit wine might be good, but since there wasn't a large quantity of vegetables, the food here wasn't really sumptuous.

Hence, Asuta's cooking tasted exceptionally good.

The dishes made from aria, tarapa, and myam at his stall were great, and his ability to make dishes with Tau sauce, which was the taste of home to Balan, made this impeccable.

And kiba wasn't really a high-class ingredient either. Balan couldn't accept it when it was minced and melded, but if it was sliced normally, the kiba tasted better than kimyusu and karon meat.

The taste was a little strong, but it was fine if strong seasoning like myam and Tau sauce were used. After getting used to it, the flavor grew on him. The meat was fatty and the texture was impeccable, and he never criticized kiba dishes ever again.

It is a little infuriating.

Balan felt as if he had lost for some reason.

Originally, Balan didn't want anything to do with Asuta and the denizens of Forest's Edge.

But Asuta went out of his way to invite Balan to try his new dish.

Back then, Balan grumbled that he would never visit Asuta's stall again. But even so, Asuta still asked someone to pass the message: "Please come and try this new dish."

And so, Asuta's dark eyes sparkled with a smile when he saw Balan being surprised by the delicious [Myam-roasted meat] .

Asuta said: "When you complained that the [Kiba burger] tastes bad, I was really frustrated. And thanks to you, I did all I could to think up a solution. I'm very grateful."

He seemed to have made a lot of effort to convey his thoughts.

Jaguar people would say whatever came to their mind, while other people wasted effort on conveying their thoughts.

From that moment on, Balan visited Asuta's stall every day.

That was when the Green Month was ending and the Blue Month was beginning, so he ate Asuta's cooking for one month.

During this time, Balan and the other denizens of Forest's Edge also got to know each other. Aside from the girls helping at the stall, he also got to meet the fearsome looking hunters of Forest's Edge.

That was because a villain from Forest's Edge was threatening the safety of the Post Station Town. In the middle of the Blue Month, the villain of Forest's Edge was executed in the town.

Ever since then, Balan got to know the denizens of Forest's Edge even better.

Some of them were more forthcoming than a Semu and could even match a Jaguar.

They might be stubborn and keep to themselves, but the Jaguar had no rights to accuse Forest's Edge denizens about that either. The denizens might be quiet, but they believed they were doing the right thing and took pride in their every move.

The girls with cold attitude at the stalls gradually warmed up to others with the passage of time. Not only did they look good, they were hardworking too. Balan even had the foolish thought of letting his son marry a girl from Forest's Edge.

But as Balan and company slowly got to know the mysterious denizens of Forest's Edge, the Blue month was over.

The wind from the window brushed Balan's hair and beard, and he grunted.

One of his companions sat up uneasily, probably disturbed by Balan's actions.

"Huh, Pops, you still awake? You sure are lively so early in the morning."

He was the deputy of the group, Arudas. He was old friends with Balan, and they had worked together for more than ten years.

"Ah, my head feels a little dizzy. I drank too much yesterday."

"Fufu, I was worried about you spending all the money you earned in the Post Station Town in just one night."

"You are exaggerating too much. Just ten or twenty bottles of fruit wine won't deplete the money we earned."

Arudas leaned against the wagon and laughed heartily.

Amongst the short southerners, Arudas was very tall. His hands were nimble, making him a great member of the architect group.

“After working for a month and a half, partying hard on the last night isn’t too much. But... Asuta’s cooking is really great. I think we ate all the kiba dishes in the inn last night.”

“...Hmmp.”

“Ah, just thinking about it makes me hungry. It’s almost noon, right? We don’t need to rush today either, so let’s start a fire and make a good meal.”

Without waiting for Balan to reply, Arudas called out to the driver: “Hey! It’s time for lunch! How about finding a good spot to start a fire?”

“Alright, this area should be safe.”

The young driver answered energetically.

The wagon stopped in a short while.

“Hey, time to get up! Get up or you will miss out on lunch!”

Arudas yelled, and the rest of the people got up slowly.

They got off the wagon, with a barren desert to their right and thick vegetation to their left.

The dark Morga mountain loomed over them to the northeast, deep within the woods. It was as foreboding as ever.

There was a barren land on the left, probably the result of excessive tree felling. The ground was cracked from the lack of water, and nothing was growing there.

“What’s happening, taking a break? What a leisurely journey.”

A voice came from up top. It was an escort who was riding on his personal Totos. The journey from Genos to Nerva was fraught with danger, so the hired two guards to

escort them.

“We should reach the next Post Station Town by nightfall. So everyone will want to eat a good meal now, right? I will forage for branches, just wait here.”

“Get some guys to go with you. There might be munto here.”

One of the escorts got down his Totos and followed Arudas and his group into the woods.

The two wagons joined together and parked by the side of the woods, allowing the Totos to feed. The Totos took their time to eat the leaves on the trees.

“Hmm, this place sure is quiet. The bustling scene in Genos is just like a dream.”

The young man who finished tending to the Totos stretched his back.

It was quiet indeed. By this time, the travelers would have started to rest, and there were no other wagons in sight. Birds flew in the clear sky, and the soft caress of the wind felt really soothing.

“But this trip was really enjoyable. This is the first time I didn’t want to leave Genos.”

“You can’t party so hard at home, right?”

“Yup, but the thing I will miss the most is the kiba dishes.”

The young man sighed depressedly.

“Even if it is kiba, the taste won’t be too different from karon after getting made into jerky, right? Sigh, we can’t eat kiba in Jaguar, right?”

“...Even Nerva which is the closest to Genos is half a month away by wagon. If you don’t like jerky, want to try bringing a kiba with us?”

“Ehh, forget it.”

As they were chatting, Arudas came back. Aside from the escort, all six men carried branches in their arms.

“This much should do, right? Hey, bring out the pot!”

A young man handed a pot from inside the wagon to his companion outside.

“This is the sack of kiba jerky, right? What about this small sack?”

“Oh, that’ the special jerky Asuta prepared for us. He said we have to finish it within seven days. Let’s eat it first.”

They piled the branches on the ground and then surrounded it with rocks. A pot was stacked on top of the rocks, and water was poured inside.

Aria and poitan were thrown right in. Arudas then opened the small sack and said: “Hmm?”

“By the way, he said the jerky can be eaten directly. It will be a pity to boil it together with the poitan.”

“The gooey poitan soup will overwhelm the taste of the meat. But if we don’t add jerky, the poitan soup won’t be palatable either.”

“Add in half a meal of normal jerky into the pot and then give out half a meal portion of this special jerky.”

The others nodded after hearing Arudas words, and started cutting the normal jerky with their knives.

After the jerky was tossed into the boiling pot of water, the others added in diced myam. Poitan soup was a bland tasting dish, resembling mud water. It was difficult to eat it without adding strong seasoning like Tau sauce.

One of the escorts asked puzzledly: “Hey, you guys were talking about kiba earlier; is that thing kiba jerky?”

He was a skilled swordsman introduced to them by someone in the [Big Tree of the South Inn] . This westerner from another city had brown hair and yellow skin. He claimed to be a former mercenary and had a leather chest plate, a sword, and an elegantly designed sheath. He looked completely different from the ruffians in the Post Station Town.

“Hey, you have stayed in Genos for quite some time. Haven’t you heard about the kiba dishes? We patronize that stall every day.”

“I have heard of that before, but I can’t eat that thing. I will be fine with the jerky I bought for myself.”

“Huh? You are not from Genos, so why do you hate kiba so much?”

“That’s because kiba and the denizens of Forest’s Edge have a bad reputation.”

Balan got mad when he heard that.

“Have the denizens of Forest’s Edge and kiba caused you any trouble before? If not, aren’t you fearing kiba dishes because of baseless rumors?”

“That’s not the reason. I don’t avoid kiba out of personal preference. It’s just that I can’t work properly if I eat something my stomach isn’t used to.”

“Hmmp! Can you work properly as escorts with such a frail bodies? How unreliable.”

It was the two men’s turn to get angry.

Arudas mediated and said: “Hey, relax.”

“No need to force yourself to eat kiba. After the job is done, I will include the cost of the jerky into your remuneration... Pops, don’t get so worked up.”

“Hmmp! I’m just saying the truth, what’s wrong with that? Given how much they fear kiba, can they really fend off munto and bandits?”

“Hey, that’s going too far.”

“Just shut up and try a piece of kiba! You will be surprised by how good it tastes.”

Balan grabbed some special jerky from the sack Arudas was holding.

However, he was shocked by the slimy sensation. It was thick and rich in fats, just like fresh meat.

The inside of the sack was protected by the smooth fake rubber tree leaves. The jerky

had so much fats that the sack had to be protected in such a way.

“This is jerky? But it isn’t dry?”

“This is special jerky! It can only be kept for seven days, but retains the original taste!”

After saying that, Balan took a bite. It was tender, and he could bite through it without cooking it in the pot. The toughness was on par with charbroiled meat.

And... the taste left Balan speechless.

It was salty and spicy and had a strong taste of spice. After removing moisture with salt, this jerky was grilled with spice.

However, the taste of the kiba had been perfectly retained.

Not just that, the delicious taste had been condensed. As he chewed, the oil within gushed out, bringing indescribable joy.

Despite the strong saltiness, the taste of the meat was still there. Only the strong taste of the kiba could rival the taste of the salt and spice. Even if karon and kimyusu were treated in the same way, it couldn’t replicate this texture.

“What’s the matter Pops? Does Asuta’s special jerky taste bad?”

“Ahh... Of course it’s good! Hey, make way!”

Balan pushed aside the young man tending the fire and squatted down. He then stuck the meat he had taken a bite of onto the tip of his knife and held it over the fire.

The fats from the meat dripped down slowly.

A fragrance spread out with the sizzling fire.

One of his companions gulped and said: “Hey, the fragrance from grilling it is incredible.”

Balan pulled back his knife, blew on the grilled jerky, and sent it to his mouth.

As he suspected, it was more delicious than eating it directly.

A jerky made from salt and spice was actually as tasty as normal cooking. Pops Balan took a deep breath and didn't know what to say.

"Pops! Don't just eat it by yourself, let us have a try too!"

"Hey, someone, bring out the skewers!"

The architects started scrambling for the jerky.

The pot was moved aside, and numerous skewers were set up by the fire. The escorts were shocked by this scene.

"Ah, this tastes really great!"

"It's good enough to be sold in the Post Station Town. Ah, I want to drink wine."

"Hey, you are eating too much! You want to finish all of it on the first day?"

Arudas lectured with a satisfied smile on his face.

Balan snapped out of it and snatched back the sack of jerky. He looked at his companions who were behaving like kids and then walked to the escorts.

"...Sorry for shouting at you just now. Please take this as an apology for the bad temper of a Jaguar man."

"Ah, I don't really mind..."

"Can I invite you to try this again? As you can see, this will get gobbled all up by tomorrow, so now is the only chance. I think this is worth a try."

The escorts glanced at each other with troubled expressions.

Balan looked at them and laughed heartily in a southern way.

"The denizens of Forest's Edge are westerners too, so they are your fellow citizens, correct? Your fellow citizens made something so delicious for us; you will be fools to turn this down. You can get mad at me if you find it nasty, but just think of this as me tricking you, and just try it."

“ .. ”

“I really envy you. After escorting us back to Nerva, you will be heading back to Genos, right? You will know what a blissful thing that is after trying this.”

Balan put the sack before the two men and then turned back and looked at his companions.

“Hey, after you are done, put the pot on top of the fire! There’s kiba in there too, so finish it all!”

His companions answered loudly with a wave of their arms.

Before visiting Asuta again next year, Balan and company won’t forget the delicious taste of the kiba. Just how much would that young Asuta improve in a year? That was the only thing Balan and company could do as they drank the kiba poitan soup.

Volume 9 End

Vegetable Settings Data

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Cooking with wild game.

Vegetables Settings Data



Aria

5 for 1 Red

Price ... **Copper Plate**

The size and shape is like that of an onion. It is light green and contain high nutritional values. Eating three of it will provide enough vitamins for one day.

Poitan



4 for 1 Red
Price & ... Copper plate

The shape and size resembles a potato. It is cream colored, and there are no difference between the skin and the content. Not suited to be eaten raw. It will turn into mush when boiled, making it great for making stew.

Eating 2 will provide enough carbohydrates for one day. It is very cheap like Aria, and is the staple food for the denizens of Forest's Edge.



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